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JANUARY ISSUE PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 2nd!

VOLUME XXXIV December, 1942 NUMBER 4

★ ★ ★ *Tenth Anniversary Issue!* ★ ★ ★

Complete Western Novel

Herd Hunters Die Young!.....T. T. Flynn 10
All young Steve Harmon, Colorado rancher, wanted in that far-off Texas range was to gather enough cattle to restock his home spread. But a slick gang of brasada bushwhackers figured to make a two-way profit on the deal: first in Steve's good gold—then in his life's blood!

Three Western Novelettes

New Hands for Shanghai Kelly.....Walt Coburn 46
Shanghai Kelly shoved his dogies north with the help of a trick poker deck, a barrel of whiskey—and the toughest bunch of mutinous cow-hands ever to line their sights on a man-breaking trail-driver's back!

Fugitives from the Flames.....Tom Roan 62
For most of his seventy-odd years, old Bilbo Green, bulldog manhunter, had been bringing them back alive to the Law's grim noose. . . . And he swore that not even the devouring flames of a raging forest fire could make him leave the trail of the Santa Fe Kid!

Stage West!.....Robert E. Mahaffay 90
Martin Gage's only ambition was to find the man whose lies had damned him in the eyes of all decent people along the frontier stagelines. . . . Yet, could he buy his long-sought vengeance at the cruel cost of honest lives?

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Tasajera citizens, as a rough cowtown joke, pinned the law-badge on broken, worthless Sandy. . . . Never knowing that a marshal-hating killer was already heading for that wild little cowtown. . . .

Tensleep's Ghost Mesa Invasion.....Bart Cassidy 80
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—And—

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They were the men who wouldn't scare—those Cherokee Strip pioneers! And their fighting grandsons are the same tough breed!

Frontiersmen Who Made History.....Cedric W. Windas 89
Thomas Galbraith, Indian Agent, had his own kind of massacre medicine when Little Crow's red warriors unleashed their savage hell on unprotected towns.

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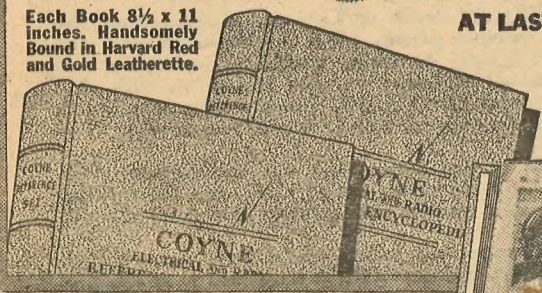

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IN THE SADDLE

"Our mission was to bomb transport and war vessels at Legaspi. Approaching the targets we were attacked by 18 Japanese pursuit planes. We continued in and our bombardier dropped all of his 600-pound bombs in train, probably destroying one transport. The first four Zeros attacked us all at once; we shot two down with side guns. A third came straight on our tail; a gunner shot him off. For the next 25 minutes we continued a running fight, shooting down three more Zeros; possibly a seventh. The fight went on for 75 miles.

"Our ship was badly damaged. The first enemy plane shot out our Number One engine; later the Number Four gas tank was literally blown out of place, and the remaining tanks absorbed plenty of lead. The oxygen system was entirely shot out; the tail wheel and the two front wheels were shot loose.

"Of the eight men in our crew, the radio operator was killed, one gunner was crippled, the other gunner was shot through the wrist, the engineer's right hand was shot off, and the rest of us were hit with pieces of shrapnel."

—From the report of Captain Hewett Wheless, U. S. Army Air Corps, on the action of December 14th, 1941.

WE'LL lay long odds that there isn't a man who reads that stirring account without a surge of pride that he's an American. Yet, that excerpt from Captain Wheless' famous exploit is only one of hundreds which, each day of battle, are being written in our sweat and blood by those who never falter to count the odds against them. Their only thought is that this nation must and will survive as a free country.

For that kind of high valor, since the dawn of our nation's history, has run quick in our veins. We saw it on Breed's Hill, in Boston, when homespun farmers with long rifles stood off the highly-trained military of an English king—who, by the way, spoke English with a heavy German accent! It was also at Valley Forge when a ragged handful of half-frozen, starving men determined to follow their general, regardless of cost in suffering or in death. It was on both sides of that bitter and sanguinary struggle during the War Between the States, and later it echoed in the immortal words of a Marine sergeant, somewhere in France, when, about to lead his men over the top he called: "Come on, you so-and-so's! You want to live forever?" And, today, at this very hour, the inspiring flame of that courage is being carried forward by United States fighting men in all parts of the world.

Yet, it was not only in war that it is evident. We find it in the development of the frontier West, as the stories, each month in these pages, show.

And nowhere, we believe, is it more colorfully evident than in the novel, "Land Rush," by Tom Roan, which we will publish next month. Here is an epic of one of the most dramatic and picturesque phases of pioneer history we have ever read,—the famous land stampede for the Cherokee Strip.

Let's turn back to the morning of April 21st, 1889:

Viewed from anywhere, it was like a halted circus stretched from rim to rim of the horizon; tents and rags of tents, wagons, carts and buggies; high wheeled bicycles—anything that would roll. Men, women and kids everywhere, with the sound of their voices mingling with the bray of jackasses, mules and horses. Oxen and cows lowed and bawled. . . . While the great far-flung line-up was held in place by hard-faced troopers with orders to shoot to kill, if any man violated the rules. . . .

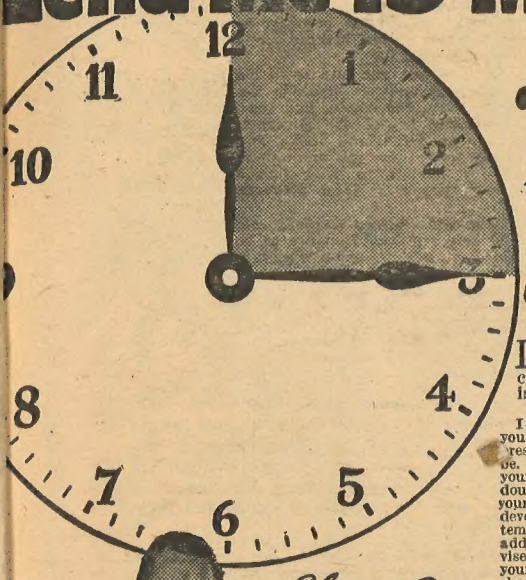
They came from everywhere; from California to Maine, from Florida to Puget Sound; half of them a vicious breed of human wolves, waiting only for hell to pop to collect what they called their due at gun- or knife-point. There were burned-out dregs of men and women, half dead on their feet; others hale and hearty with gales of quick, gruff laughter shaking their powerful chests; there was the honest settler, the half-wealthy, the down-at-the-heel poor, the get-rich-quick boomer; gambled and thief, sinner and saint, crimp and pimp, dance-hall pick-pocket and pious parson—a strange mixture of the devil's scrap pile and the best that ever walked the ground.

Some looked on it only as a speculative adventure; others were hell-bent to wrest a home from the soil and become honest citizens of the new territory—a

(Continued on page 8)

Lend Me 15 Minutes A Day

..and I'll prove I can make you a NEW MAN



I'M "trading-in" old bodies for new! I'm taking men who know that the condition of their arms, shoulders, chest and legs—their strength, "wind," and endurance—is not 100%. And I'm making NEW MEN of them.

I don't care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double quick time! I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that there's not even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

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I Was a 97-lb. Weakling

All the world knows I was ONCE a skinny, scrawny 97-pound weakling. And NOW it knows that I won the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." Against all comers! How did I do it? How do I work miracles in the bodies of other men in only 15 minutes a day? The answer is "Dynamic Tension," the amazing method I discovered and which changed me from a 97-pound weakling into the champion you see here!

What 15 Minutes a Day Can Do For You

Are you ALL MAN—tough-muscled, on your toes every minute, with all the up-and-at-'em that can lick your weight in wildcats? Or do you need the help I can give you—the help that has already worked such wonders for other fellows, everywhere?

In just 15 minutes a day, right in the privacy of your own home, I'm ready to prove that "Dynamic Tension" can lay a new outfit of solid muscle over every inch of your body. Let me put new, smashing power into your arms and shoulders—give you an armor-shield of stomach muscle that laughs at punches—strengthen your legs into real columns of surging stamina. If lack of exercise or wrong living has weakened you inside, I'll get after that condition, too, and show you how it feels to LIVE!

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"Feel like a million dollars and have a 44" normal chest—a 2" GAIN!" —L. A. S., Illinois

"My doctor thinks your course is fine. Have put two inches on my chest and ½ inch on my neck." —B. L., Oregon

"My muscles are bulging out and I feel like a new man. My chest measures 38 in., an increase of 5 in., and my neck increased 2 in." —G. M., Ohio

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(Continued from page 6)

wild land yet without government, and only powder and ball to protect the rights of men. . . .

There we meet Joe Lee, old one-legged veteran of the War Between the States; his gray-haired wife, and their granddaughter, Laurel. And the pride of old Joe's life—the black gelding, Cannon Ball, which he is sure will carry him to the land where he wants to live out his days.

But Booker T. Killdee had other ideas, and when he saw Joe's horse, and failed to bargain for him, he knocked the defenseless old fellow down. And it would have been Joe Lee's last memory, had not a young cowpuncher stepped in right then. . . .

Later, Joe is just reminding the girl that a raiding cowpuncher crew had killed her father and mother when. . . .

"Look!" the girl gasped. They're lining up! The sun—it's almost over head.

"In yore places!" That command rolled along the tense, waiting line like a bugle. "Get set! Get ready!"

A yell went up. Soldiers sat their saddles tense, their carbines drawn from the boots. Everyone seemed to stop breathing. A jackass brayed somewhere along the line. Black Canon Ball threw up his head with a shrill nicker. The girl sawed at his bits, and Joe Lee scampered on his back. Even his wife, old Nancy, was wide-eyed with excitement now.

She came forward, faded blue sunbonnet thrown back, her eyes misty. In her hand was a small New Testament.

"Just hold it in your hand, Joey," she shrilled. "Just you hold it an' I'll be prayin' as me an' Laurel drive the cattle on behind you. Just—"

A bugle shrilled, keen and stabbing as a knife. A sputtering burst of shots crashed in the distance, sounding like flames crackling. Women and children fell beside their wagon wheels, fell like they'd been shot, praying. Then they were streaking forward, the sharp spattering of hoofs drowned out by the thunder of rolling wagon-wheels. Oaths, prayers, and the thunder of guns added to the bedlam.

"Go yonder, Cannon Ball!" prayed old Joe Lee, in a wild, half-crying, half-laughing voice, as he lay low, face a straining mask of hope and terror, whipped by a flying mane blacker than a starless midnight. "Oh, go yonder, my Cannon Ball!"

We see the graphic picture of that classic race from Joe's eyes as the whole line lunges forward, strings out, with men crying, cursing, whipping their mounts like mad things.

Behind him pounded the cowboy, Morgan, stretched full length on a running gelding's back to spread his weight. And out yonder, north, south, behind him to the east, they were pouring forward, each red-faced rider and driver looking for the flags marking each location ahead.

Joe Lee had but one picture in his mind. . . . That green valley beyond the break in the hills ahead. The house, the barn, the corral, and the spring wheat that he had planted before the government men—that he no longer owned the land he'd paid good, hard-sweating money for! If he got through now, there'd be no cowboys or soldiers to drive him out—no roughs to shoot down people in their doorways in the dead of night!

Men would die before this day was done, and some had died before it had a chance to begin. The Cannon Ball shied at a dead man who lay in a little gully off to the right; the look of terror still on his whiskered, staring face. A soldier's bullet was through his heart; this man had been one of those who had tried to slip through last night. . . .

Booker T. Killdee, and his horde of hired gunmen and killers were still behind Joe, riding fast in a jouncing, bouncing buggy, drawn by two matched grays. There were more of Kildee's men behind him. They were the land-grabbers who would turn over their holdings to Killdee—who would not be satisfied until even the honest men were driven out.

But even this race was not a game to be played with honesty. There was too much at stake here. Joe was thundering through a long, grassy level stretch when the shots crashed at him from the bushes at either side of the trail.

Cannon Ball lunged, slipped and came down as if he'd been shot through the head. The old man left the bare back as if it had been greased. He plunged on, crutches trailing him, and slid to a long halt.

"Neck broke!" wailed Lee. It's—it's murder—that's what it is!"

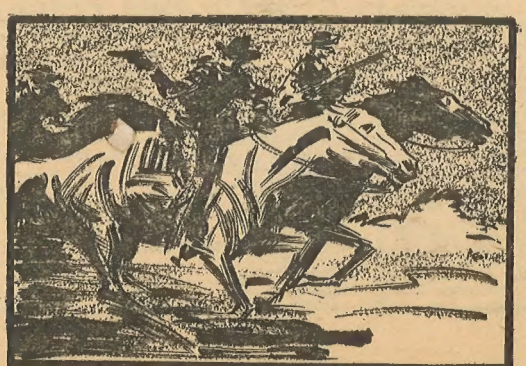
Then he turned, half getting up, seeing Morgan top the slight rise behind him. The cowpuncher was coming through now, when another burst of shots opened, and the cowboy reeled drunkenly in the saddle. . . .

The race was lost now, hopelessly lost! And lost, too, was old Joe Lee's hope of regaining the home he'd already bought twice with his gold and his blood!

That preview brings out the full flavor of Tom Roan's colorful novel of a man who fought twice for his home and lost it; yet, old and worn as he was, he rose again to fight once more. We think it shows, as well as anything in frontier lore, the unbeatable spirit and fine courage which was in the warp and woof of the men who forged a new country from the great, lawless wilderness.

And we are thankful that today their sons and grandsons are carrying out that glorious tradition of courage!

The January issue is published December 2nd!



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• • HERD HUNTERS

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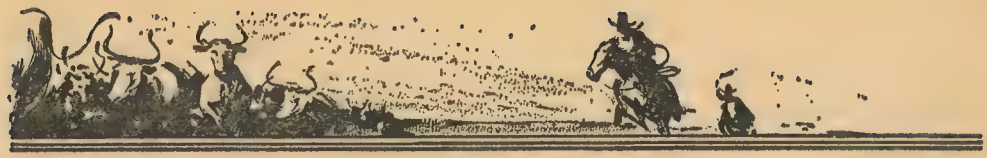

DIE YOUNG!

By T. T. FLYNN

Steve's guns kept pounding as the broken-nosed Hoop Chase pitched forward....

CHAPTER ONE

Satan's Twins

STEVE HARMON was walking along the crooked, San Antonio street with Patricia Parker and her father, Major Thad Parker, when the stranger on the tar-black horse upset the present and the future with just two brief words.

He had a sandy stubble on his broad jaw. He wore two cartridge belts, one for rifle, one for revolver ammunition. Steve noted the heavy cowhide chaps

scuffed and scarred by mesquite thickets such as lay to the south and westward, between the Nueces and the Rio Grande Rivers.

The man stared boldly at Patricia. Then his glance slid to Steve. "Howdy, kid!"

Steve lifted a hand. And as the man rode past, a sudden premonition brought Steve's head around with a startled jerk.

Patricia was amused. "Steve, you get acquainted fast. We've only been here since last night."

"I've never seen him before," said Steve. The incredible premonition must have marked him. Patricia gave him a questioning look.

Major Parker walked beside his daughter with the spare, unbending habit of Army days, which had never yielded to the easier habits of a successful cowman. His manner had the habitual faint disapproval, to which Steve had, by now, become accustomed.

"He seemed certain of you, Harmon."

"So I noticed," Steve agreed.

The Major was as tall as Steve. His glance frowned across Tricia's gay little hat.

"He looked like one of the rustlers from the Brasada thickets across the Nueces," the Major said coldly. "I'm told this morning that they may be even worse than we've heard, up in Colorado. We may have trouble."

"That's one reason I wanted to trail my cattle and horses north with your herd, sir. Our two outfits should be strong enough to handle trouble."

The Major, his lips pressed together, walked in silence on the rough cobble-stoned sidewalk as they returned to the patio of the Meunster Hotel. The place was owned by a German and built by the Spaniards of an earlier day.

Last night Steve had stood with Patricia and watched the moon pour silver on the fig trees growing in the patio, and on the dark flat stones and the little stream running through the patio like a murmuring silver thread which stitched the old Spanish past to the present and the future.

"It's lovely, Steve," Patricia had said last night. "I'm glad I came."

"Trailing cattle and horses home to Colorado won't be anything like this," Steve had reminded. "I wish you'd go back home on the train."

Patricia had laughed under her breath. "I worked too hard to make father bring me."

"It's a long trail, and a hard one," Steve had insisted.

"With two big brothers along?" Patricia had reminded. "And my father? And you?"

That had been last night. Now the late afternoon sun spread its hot gold over the second-story galleries above them in the patio, and Major Parker dismissed his daughter abruptly.

"You'd better rest in your room, Tricia. I want to talk with Harmon."

Steve's brief smile told Patricia nothing. He did not know what was on her father's mind. It would not, he guessed, be too cordial.

ALL the way from Colorado on the train, through Kansas and the Indian Nations, and down through Texas, he had known that Major Parker, and the Parker boys, Guy and Sandy, who were already in Texas, were not too enthusiastic about him. The Parker men wanted too badly to buy his Horse Canyon ranch and water rights.

Tricia vanished in her cool stone-floored room on the left side of the patio. The Major spoke stiffly as Steve accompanied him out of the patio.

"I'll tilt the price five thousand for your Horse Canyon holdings, and take my chances on finding more of your winter drift still alive down on the Panhandle."

"Still the same answer," Steve refused politely. "The place suited my father to the day he died last summer. And it suits me."

The flush on the Major's spare face suppressed, temper and irritation controlled as Major Parker controlled all else in the carefully considered pattern of his life.

"I was your father's neighbor, young man. He did not believe you would ever return to live at Horse Canyon. He expected me to buy the place, if it was ever sold."

They reached the street again as an ox-drawn Mexican *carreta* loaded with

prairie hay lumbered past on great solid wheels that groaned and squealed on ungreased axles.

"I'm sorry," said Steve regretfully. "I thought we settled all this business back home."

But the Major testily persisted: "Most of your cattle died in the drift this winter. I'm offering you more than the ranch is worth. You haven't money enough to restock properly. And I doubt if you'll stay with it long, anyway. You and your brother cared little enough for the place, after you were old enough to leave. That much was clear to everyone."

"Let's leave Bud out of it, since he's dead."

"*Is* he dead—or is your twin brother also to be my neighbor someday?" the Major demanded pointedly.

Steve knew then the Major had had the same premonition as he'd felt when the passing stranger greeted him. Steve stared somberly at the fine hot dust in the street. When he looked up, the Major was watching him. So he answered unwillingly, with the tight, unhappy feeling that always gripped him when he thought about wild, young Bud.

"Bud was killed in Arizona before I came back."

"He was shot for a horse thief," corrected the Major bluntly. And when he saw the unhappy look on Steve's face, the Major added, not unkindly: "I was sorry for you and your father. But Bud was a bad one. I saw it coming on when you two were only boys."

Steve stared again at the dusty street, thinking back through the years, barely aware of the Major's next words:

"Folks never could tell you two boys apart. I know Bud's dirt was often blamed on you. Bud thought it was funny. Having you neighbor us at Horse Canyon is one thing. But your brother there with you is another."

"Bud was shot," Steve repeated. "I talked to men who were with him in the running fight."

"Who found Bud's body?" The Major wanted to know.

"He was shot in the back and was hanging over on the horse's neck when he rode away from the others. His horse was found almost a week later, with dry blood on the saddle. I spent almost a month hunting him. It was rough country. I might have been close to his body a dozen times and never known."

"You might be close to him now and not know it," said the Major dryly. Then, before Steve could speak, the Major stopped him with an impatient gesture. "Bud was always good at covering his tracks. I believed he was dead until that man spoke to you. He's a dead ringer for Bud and why would a stranger speak to you like that? You're twins, you know."

Steve shrugged. He had been asking himself the same question. There was a stern note of finality in Major Parker's voice.

"I don't think Bud died. I think he fell off his horse and pulled through some way. I think he's been seen south of here in the brush country since then. And if Bud is alive he'll be back at Horse Canyon some day. I don't want him for a neighbor. You'll lose your ranch sooner or later anyway, if Bud joins you. I'm willing to pay more than the place is worth to settle everything now."

"I'll think it over," Steve said, and with a sense of relief he walked away from the stern, level-eyed old man who had known his brother and himself back through the years.

Steve doubted that Major Parker or anyone else had known what it meant to be Bud's double. To have Bud's face and figure and laugh. To have Bud's bleached hair, blue eyes, ready talk, and that warm, fierce feeling of being one with Bud, from birth through life. And to hold the deep and painful knowledge that there was weakness in Bud—a recklessness that Steve had tried to suppress by staying near him, until those last lonely weeks of search in the Arizona Border country had left only Bud's unhappy memory.

The Major's faint disapproval always suggested that what had been in Bud Harmon might also be in Steve, buried deep and suppressed perhaps, but cast there by the mold which had shaped them one like the other.

At the moment it did not matter. Steve walked the streets looking for the black horse with the white face blaze, and for the strange rider who had greeted him by another name.

SPAIN and Mexico had shaped San Antonio, but now the town was Texan, busy and growing, with fine new houses crowding back the old tule-thatched Mexican *jacals*.

Wealthy merchants rubbed elbows with lean homesteaders and level-eyed ranchmen, with emigrants from Europe, newcomers from the Eastern states, Mexicans from below the Rio Grande, bull-whackers, mustang hunters, well-dressed gamblers. Cowmen back from the northern cattle trails swaggered in the streets and plazas.

By deep twilight Steve had searched along narrow, crooked Commerce Street and come a second time into the main plaza without finding the horse or man that he sought.

The stranger had probably put his horse in a livery barn or corral and taken a room. He would be out after dark when trade in the barrooms and gambling places picked up.

Two hours later Steve was on the rough stone sidewalk of Commerce Street when he heard a burst of gunfire in the main plaza just ahead.

By the time he reached the plaza other men were hurrying toward the Variety Theater. He joined the crowd around a dead man sprawled in the street.

Excited comments named the victim as Jack Markham, a deputy marshal, shot by two strangers.

The deputy had approached the strangers and spoken to them. The next instant guns had been in action. The strangers had walked into the saloon a few steps away and vanished out the back.

On Steve's left a thin, whiney voice lifted importantly. "I seen them! One was a big, sandy-haired fellow. Him an' his partner was in Shorty's Barber Shop this afternoon."

Steve's mind leaped to the sandy-bearded stranger riding the black horse. The man who would know if Bud were alive or dead. But now the stranger had escaped. Steve edged over behind the man with the whiney voice.

A doctor made a brief examination of the dead man. The body was removed. The crowd broke up. The whining man cut across the plaza. Near the middle of the plaza Steve fell into step beside him and spoke calmly.

"You said that you saw the men who did that shooting in a barber shop this afternoon? Did you see their horses?"

Whiney-Voice wore an old derby hat cocked toward the left eye. He had a seedy, sporty look. His chortle was sly.

"Their horses didn't shoot Jack Markham, stranger. But I sure seen them two hard-cases close enough."

"How would you describe them?"

"One of them wasn't so old," said Whiney-Voice. He looked up at Steve, estimating. "He'd be about your—your . . ." There was light enough in the plaza to see the man's mouth gaping in a kind of frozen horror. He stopped and Steve stopped.

"What's the matter?" Steve demanded.

The answer was laced with stammering fright. "I didn't see nothing! I wouldn't talk, anyways! Ain't any of it m-my business, is it?"

Whiney-Voice would have bolted if Steve had not caught his arm. "My size? Looked like *me*, did he?"

"You g-got time to get out of town, mister! I won't say a word!"

Steve released the man's arm, stood silent, shaken by the knowledge that Bud was still alive. Bud had been here in San Antonio, and was in trouble again. Or rather, Steve was in trouble. For Bud was gone—and Steve looked exactly like him!

Whiney-Voice backed off a fearful step, glancing furtively around. "Wh-what are you goin' to do?"

"Shut up!" Steve ordered roughly, and the smaller man sided him with lagging steps. He had seen one man killed by this tall, scowling stranger—or so he believed, and would swear to that the rest of li life.

Two blocks from the plaza, in a crooked, narrow side street, Steve halted at the mouth of an alley. "Walk in t'ere. Keep going. Forget about me, no matter where we meet."

The alley blackness quickly swallowed the man. He would run for help, Steve guessed cynically. And because his peril was great, he walked fast around the next dark corner and headed back to the hotel by the dim, crooked, side streets.

He had left his room door unlocked,

and was inside, fumbling for a match, before the odor of fresh tobacco smoke warned of a recent visitor. Instantly, silently on his toes, Steve pressed flat against the room wall.

The quiet was absolute as Steve held his breath. Then a low chuckle sounded at the bed.

"Don't get spooky, Steve. It's Bud."

CHAPTER TWO

Steve Rides the Death Watch

STEVE swore. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Bedsprings creaked as Bud shifted position and complained: "Now ain't that a fine, brotherly welcome for the prodigal?"

"More welcome than you'll get in the plaza! How'd you find my room?"

"Walked in and asked the Mex porter where my room was. You oughta seen the look on his face," Bud chuckled. "He thought you was blind drunk to forget your room. So you been to the plaza?"

"I'd have been shot or locked up for what you've done, if I hadn't been lucky! They're looking for you!"

Bud grinned and shook his head. "Ain't you got it mixed up? You really mean they're lookin' for *you!*" he corrected.

It had always been like this, since Bud had been old enough to sense that strange eyes could not tell Steve and himself apart. And so were unable to tell Bud's guilt from Steve's innocence.

And as always Steve experienced the helpless anger that never was strong enough to cleave deeply between himself and Bud.

"You two killed that deputy!"

"Why not?" Bud agreed comfortably. "He done me a dirty trick in Austin, and he was fixin' to get a piece of reward that's hung on Brawley. Wasn't anything else to do, was there?"

"Plenty!" Steve snapped. "You could have come back to Horse Canyon and settled down. Why didn't you send word you were alive? Me swearing for over three years you were killed in that fight? Your father died last year thinking you were dead."

"No!" Bud exclaimed; and then he added slowly: "Maybe it's better. I never was much but a worry to him, was I?"

Silence held them for a moment. Bud broke it. "I guess that's why I faded out. Too many folks worrying about me. Arizona was gettin' too tight anyway. What you doing down here in Texas, Steve?"

"I'm with Major Parker. The northers this winter about cleaned our range. I've got enough cash to make a middling start again. We heard that Texas stock was dirt cheap, so we threw in to buy and drive north together. Guy and Sandy Parker have been down here for a month, near Tornillo, getting stuff together."

"Too bad I didn't know it. I know men who'll get you fifteen, twenty-dollar horses out of Mexico for five dollars flat—many as you want. Good steers and cows as cheap."

"We're showing our brands to the State inspector. Look, Bud, Horse Canyon was willed to me because you were supposed to be dead. Half of it's yours if you'll get in the harness and do right."

Bud slapped his leg, laughing.

"By God, then, I win ten dollars from Brawley! Soon as Brawley said he'd seen me walking with a pretty girl, I knew you were around, Steve. I bet him ten dollars I'd get an offer before morning to settle down and be good. Joke if it was that Brawley thought it was the girl. He said if I got the offer, she'd have to know about me, but if she knew about me, she wouldn't waste breath on the offer. He'd have bet fifty dollars on it."

Always Bud had been like this, with a twist of humor about himself. "You long-legged, outlaw maverick!" Steve said helplessly. He struck three matches together, so that the sizeable flame threw light over them both.

Bud sat on the bed, grinning up at the wavering yellow flame. And the old warm feeling came back as Steve thought that strangers who marveled at their likeness would never understand the inner ties that caught them together.

Steve dropped the charred match ends, and the darkness hid Bud.

"How about it?" Steve urged. "Home to Horse Canyon and start all over, the two of us?"

Bud stood up and laughed. "Not me. I'll stay out in the brush. If that was Major Parker who Brawley seen you with

today, I'll bet the pretty girl was Patricia. You were soft about her," recalled Bud with amusement. "No wonder you're burring around Horse Canyon. You going to marry her?"

"I haven't asked her. What are you going to do?"

BUD rubbed his stubbled chin. Killing the town Law won't set well with the local folks. I'm going to jump the Rio Grande. I stopped in to warn you San Antone won't be healthy by morning, seeing as you're a ringer for me. Better jump the River, too, Steve—or when the shooting happened, was you with folks who can swear you out of it?"

"I was out on the streets alone, looking for you!" snapped Steve, and turned blistering profanity on Bud.

At the first pause Bud laughed softly. "That's elegant cussing."

"I ought to take you to the marshal!"

"Let's go then and get me hung fast," offered Bud, plainly not worried.

Steve cussed his brother again, futilely, helplessly, as he had in past years for trouble Bud had made. "Get out!" he said finally. "I'll do the best I can."

"It'll take some doing," Bud drawled, still amused. "Better come along."

"No, damn you!"

"Going to stay here an' get yourself hung?"

"I'll get out of town tonight and join Guy and Sandy Parker. We're taking the herd over Horsehead Crossing. Maybe I can stay one jump ahead of your poison!"

"You'll be a real jumper if you do! Got a horse and saddle? Or a rifle."

"No. I was going to buy them tomorrow."

"Then you're practically naked," said Bud. "Look, Steve, go to Randy's Corral and Wagon Yard. Tell old Jim Randy you want your extra outfit. He'll think you're me. You can trust old Randy up to a thousand dollar reward. But it might be a good idea to get out of his sight before they post the reward for you."

"For *you!*" Steve corrected bitterly.

"I didn't ask you to stop here in my Texas pasture," reminded Bud blithely. "If you think this is hard luck, cut my trail enough and you'll learn what real hard luck is!"

Bud paused, and in the darkness, his chuckle was amused. "You can shoot as good as I can, anyway. Keep your gun loose an' drag it quick if a stranger looks like trouble. Because it'll probably be plenty trouble."

"So I'm a damned outlaw and gunfighter until I get out of Texas!"

Bud moved close, slapping Steve's shoulder. "It'll be good for you. *Adios,* Steve. Maybe you'll get an idea why Horse Canyon wouldn't suit me."

The room was still dark when Bud walked out, still highly amused. For long moments Steve stood alone, thinking about Bud and about the dead man spraweld in the plaza street.

He began to swear again in the same futile helplessness. And then he lighted the oil lamp in the iron wall bracket and began to yank out his trail clothes, his cartridge belt and his revolver.

THE next day Steve rode south and west into thorn brush country. He had ridden all night, until daybreak, and had slept off the trail in a mesquite thicket.

Last night he had left the hotel after brief words with Patricia at her room door. "I'll see you and your father and your brothers at Tornillo," he'd told her.

She'd asked, "Isn't this rather sudden, Steve?"

"I get ideas. Tell your father about it in the morning. I won't be back this way."

Patricia had known something was wrong. And the bearded, foxy old man at the horse corral also had known something was wrong.

"Musta been something, Kid, to clean you down to a side-gun an' spurs," old Randy had suggested past the smoky lantern he held up between them.

"Trot out my outfit if you've got it!" Steve had snapped, and had been surprised by the hurried fear his irritation had caused.

"Don't get sore about it, Kid. I got everything ready."

Now riding through hot sunlight

toward Tornillo, Steve thought of the old man's hasty fear, and wondered glumly what kind of reputation Bud had made for himself.

Guy and Sandy Parker were making headquarteres southwest of Tornillo at the ranch of an Englishman named Stoneleigh. They had rented one of Stoneleigh's big fenced pastures to hold their livestock purchases until the trail herd was made up. They also had authority to buy for Steve's account.

Steve knew the northern brush country; he had heard of this brush country of south Texas, called the Brasada, which he was entering. And he began to realize that this Texas brush was deceptive.

Stately live oaks lifted above other greenery and bordered broad openings of curly mesquite grass. Birds and wild life were plentiful, with now and then a brief glimpse of a vanishing steer or cow. But close to the brush was a tangle of thorny mesquite and other thorn-covered trees and bushes, mixed with prickly pear cactus, clumps of Spanish dagger, rattailed cactus and endless brush.

Steve understood the heavy leather leggings, scarred and scratched, the leather stirrup tapaderos, the extra-strong ducking jacket that were part of Bud's riding outfit.

Steve had the oppressive feeling that a living barrier was shutting off the world of great spaces that he knew. The brush hemmed in, swallowed a strange rider. But a fugitive could vanish in that endless thorn tangle.

During the long hot afternoon Steve saw two men riding across the far side of a grassy stretch. They stopped and watched him. On an impulse Steve turned off the trail toward them to speak of Tornillo.

He put the horse into a lope, and the strangers rode quickly into the nearby screen of brush. Smiling wryly, Steve reined back toward the trail.

The slap-fire of a rifle shot, the whiplash of the bullet was all the warning he had of danger. Steve spurred and swung the horse hard to the right. Then a second bullet scream across his back told how close death had brushed.

The two strangers were not warning him back to the Tornillo trail to ride about his business. They were shooting to kill. From Steve's running horse they were invisible. But they could see him and they were still shooting.

Steve yanked Bud's rifle from the saddle scabbard. Hot anger raced with him as Bud's small horse headed toward the nearest brush cover.

They crashed into the thicket. Steve had to weave and dodge wildly in the saddle as the hard-running little roan plunged through invisible openings and interlacing tangles that Steve never would have tried.

Thorns stabbed and raked the waist-high leather leggings, tore at the heavy ducking jacket, snagged at face and hands. The wild plunging zig-zag through the thicket had borne him toward the concealed strangers. Now, stopping in the sultry quiet, Steve heard the distant crackle of other horses retreating through the brush.

The sounds faded. Steve realized he was sweating, shaken from the anger which had sent him after the men. He thrust the rifle back in the saddle boot and worked slowly out of the thicket; and as he rode on toward Tornillo, Steve watched the brush and the grassy openings with a new, cold caution.

HE REACHED Tornillo at twilight, riding directly out of the brush past thatched Mexican *jacals,* and then past solid, flat-roofed adobe houses. He had avoided the stage road from San Antonio for the longer back trail, and he came to the center street as a four-horse stage rumbled out to the north through fast-thickening dusk.

There was more business than Steve had thought. Too many saloons for a town this size, more wagons, buggies, saddled horses and hitchracks than he had expected after the solitary ride.

The roan paced slowly along the street and Steve scanned faces and movement on either side. Bud's description might already have been brought fast along the stage road.

Steve dismounted at a hitching bar in front of a small eating place. He wrapped the reins and for a deliberate moment looked around, weighing what he had sensed along the street.

Most of the saddled horses that he could see carried rifle scabbards. But what Steve pondered was a guarded watchfulness in every man he had passed. They were more than curious; they had the same cold wariness that he had brought into town. Cross-currents of threat seemed to fill the purple twilight as he sat down at the wooden restaurant counter.

The sense of impending, unseen danger might come from the thorn brush which held Tornillo against the outer world. But more likely, Steve decided, the threat was in the men who came out of that brush. And when a hand dropped on his shoulder, Steve swung fast to his feet ready for trouble.

He faced Sandy Parker's welcoming grin. "When'd you get in?" Sandy greeted. "Where's father?"

"Be a day or so before he and Tricia leave San Antonio," said Steve, and he was grinning, too. Sandy was his favorite of the three Parker brothers.

A year younger than Steve, Sandy was built slim and wiry, with a spattering of freckles and a light-brown silky mustache which Sandy had raised at seventeen with great pride. Here in Texas Sandy had adopted the brush rider's gear, even to leather chin strap on his hat. But under the black hat Sandy's face looked worn, strained.

"Tricia came, too?" Sandy asked sharply.

"She wants to make the trip back with us."

"She can't!" said Sandy emphatically; then he shrugged. "But we'll settle that later. You coming out to Stoneleigh's place tonight?"

"I'd thought of it. I brought gold in my belt."

"Don't talk about gold here in town!" Then, easier, Sandy said: "I've got to meet a man in the Horn Saloon. Come in for a drink when you're through eating."

A little later Steve entered the swinging half-doors and saw Sandy near the back of the bar talking to two men.

They were Nando Watling and Doc Watling, and only in the two names were the two men alike. Nando Watling was

the younger and larger, with bull-like power in chest and shoulders and thick short neck. A grin was seldom off his face while Steve was with them.

Doc Watling was Nando's cousin, Steve learned. Doc was a thin, older man, carefully dressed in gray broadcloth. The pallor on his face had a gray, dead look, his black hair was shot with gray, he talked softly in a dead-flat voice.

"We're glad to see you folks from the north; we've got the cattle and you've got the money. Have a drink."

Steve wondered if the gray-faced Doc ever smiled, and while Steve had his drink Sandy explained: "I'm riding south tomorrow to look over some cows and horses Doc will sell cheap. Want to come, Steve?"

"I might as well," Steve assented, and Sandy seemed pleased. He told the Watlings that they'd have to be getting along. When they were outside, Steve asked: "Brothers?"

"Doc a real doctor?"

"Sort of, they say. He runs the Horn and has a finger in a lot of things." And for some reason there was weary bitterness in Sandy's added words. "Doc's sort of the big augur for all the Watlings. He's got the brains."

Steve thought the gray soft Doc over as they split to get their horses, and when they were together again, riding out of town, Steve spoke abruptly.

"You look like the riding's been hard. Anything wrong?"

Sandy was silent for a moment, and then he pointed to the round bright moon slowly lifting over the dark wall of thorn brush on their left. "See that moon?"

"Looks nice."

"Think so?" said Sandy, his laugh short. "That ain't a moon, Steve. That's a lamp for the whole damn Brasada and Mexican across the Rio Grande to rustle and thieve by. Take a good look at it; that moon may cost us all the cash we've scraped up and spent down here."

Steve whistled softly. "Tell me."

"When the moon's out they can work. Steve, this stretch from here to the Rio Grande is the toughest spot in the States and Territories. Back home we heard talk about law getting thin across the Nueces, and some of it sounded like tall talk."

"In a way," Steve agreed, nodding.

Sandy lighted a cigarette and in the match flare his thin face looked haggard and worried.

SANDY said emphatically, "We never heard half of it. Not so long ago Mexicans and Indians raided these Texans; now thieves and killers are in here from everywhere. They're being run out of the Nations and East Texas. A lot of the scum that were in on the big kill of the southern buffalo herd moved down here from the Fort Griffin district. They run cattle and horses over into Mexico and swap for stuff stolen across the Rio Grande. The law's a joke here in the brush. A gang can stay hid out and safe as long as they want. The Brasada's crawling with 'em."

"Must be an honest ranchman around somewhere," Steve suggested, half-humorously. "How about this Stoneleigh?"

"Stoneleigh's too honest for his good," said Sandy promptly. "Around here an honest man has to close one eye most of the time. Take stolen stock hid in a man's pasture overnight, or for a week or so. He'll do better to go blind about it. Talk may get him shot one day while he's out in the brush. Or his own range may be cleaned out. Stoneleigh's trying to hold on until the Law catches up. It'll come any year now and there'll be hell to pay while the Brasada's being cleaned out."

"Looks like we'd have done better to buy cattle up north, even at more cost."

"We've got a bull by the tail and can't let loose," said Sandy. "Most of our stuff is bought. Guy and me have been trying to hold it until we can start trailing home. But we've been losing stuff right out of Stoneleigh's pasture! That's why we're going to buy from Doc Watling. Maybe if we spend cash money with the Watlings, we'll have less trouble."

"It's that way, huh?"

"That way," said Sandy grimly. "Dirty work in these parts most probably'll have a Watling mixed in it. You see why Patricia's got to go home by train?"

Steve agreed about Patricia, and he told Sandy about the two strangers who had shot at him.

"They might have thought you were the law," Sandy guessed. "Maybe they only wanted your horse or outfit. Or they might have had some stolen beef nearby, or thought you were somebody else. Killing a man ain't so much in these parts."

"They must have thought I was someone else," Steve decided, thinking of Bud, and presently when they left the main road for a trail through the brush he was curious.

"We'll short-cut through Stoneleigh's pasture," Sandy explained. "Guy hired four men to ride the fences at night. I want to see if they're on the job."

"Any chance of them taking us for rustlers?"

"Not much. I told them I'd ride home this way two-three hours after dark. One of them'll be looking for me."

The trail struck through the moonlight and mesquite grass of a big opening and Sandy pointed ahead.

"That old dead oak off there is called Dead Man's tree. Stoneleigh says years ago a raiding party of Mexicans crossed the Rio Grande and were cornered near here. Eight were hung on that tree at once. The tree died right after. Mexicans won't come near it after dark. They say the dead men killed it, and are still there."

A few minutes later Sandy said: "There's one of our men."

Steve made out the dark figure breasting the inside of the gate post, with one hand carelessly on the top gate wire.

"That you, Carson?" Sandy called.

The man did not answer. As they neared the gate Sandy's horse snorted, whirled off the trail. Steve reached the gate.

"Look, Sandy!" Steve called sharply, and he dropped from the saddle and held the excited horse as he stepped nearer and peered at the gruesome sight against the gate post.

CHAPTER THREE

Bait for a Gun-Trap!

THE man stood with his hand on the top gate wire. Seen close, his head was canted over, wide-brimmed gray hat jammed carelessly askew above the temple. A rope had been passed around his back and around the fence post and drawn tight, so that he appeared to be standing there naturally, with the wrist carelessly on the gate wire. But the eye whites were blank and glistening in the sockets. Blood stained the slack mouth and as Sandy dismounted and stepped near, Steve thumbed a match into brief flame and saw chest wounds.

"Here's another for Dead Man's Tree!" Steve said.

Sandy's voice shook. "It—it's Carson, the guard!"

Steve touched the limp wrist on the gate wire. "He's still warm." And his voice hardened. "Somebody had a hell of a sense of humor!"

"Couple of months ago a buckboard came into Tvevitos with a dead man tied on the seat and the reins wrapped around his wrists like he was driving."

"Makes it worse than murder," Steve said. The hard note stayed in his voice. "We're due to lose cattle tonight. Want to look into it?"

"Might as well," Sandy decided, and he guessed: "They'll probably go through the fence west of here. That'll give a straight push toward Little Angel Creek and not much risk of being seen."

They turned west along the straight fence line, rifles out and ready, no further words between them. Now the threat of the dark brush thickets was real. The softly stepping horses made little sound in the sand.

Three or four miles along the fence, the thin far flurry of gunshots abruptly stopped them.

"In the pasture," Steve said softly.

No other shots followed. Under his breath Sandy said: "Their closest way out is straight ahead and through the fence. . . . If there's enough men, Steve, they'll get us."

"We can worry them some. I keep thinking of that poor devil tied to the gate post."

"Me, too," agreed Sandy, low-voiced. "Let's go."

Where the fence ran down a steep slope and across a small grassy draw Sandy halted and listened.

Brush crackled faintly in the distance.

"Here they come!" Sandy breathed.

"Don't seem to be anyone at the fence," Steve decided. "Most likely they cut the wire and all went in. They'll pass us at a run and keep going. We'd better bust the cattle over into the brush."

They rode fast across the open grass, toward the increasing crash and crackle of cattle coming at a run. They were still in the open when the lead animals burst from the dark brush into the moonlight.

Steve spurred toward them, firing the revolver.

The cattle were half-wild, and the unreasoning panic of their kind struck the first long-horned cows and steers. They scattered blindly toward the nearest brush. The rest followed; forty or fifty head at least, Steve judged.

He sighted a lick of flame from a revolver off to his left and he swung the running horse toward the stranger, dragging out Bud's rifle. He fired, and the man's horse swerved toward the nearest mesquite, its rider humped helplessly over the saddle horn as he vanished among the thorn branches.

Steve spun his horse in that direction and sighted Sandy charging two more horsemen who had followed the cattle out of the brush. The new men were shooting at Sandy. They turned their guns on Steve as he galloped at them.

Steve heard the high, vicious scream of a bullet passing close. He fired at the rustlers, Sandy's guns were blasting as he converged on the renegades with Steve. Suddenly the two strange riders spurred hard into the brush.

Steve crashed after the strangers. The tangle of slashing thorn branches dragged off his hat. When he pulled up and listened, the strangers were still riding hard through the thickets.

When Sandy joined him they listened, and could hear only receding movements far off.

"I only seen four," Sandy stated.

"That's about all there was," Steve guessed. "Chances are they're through for tonight. Let's get out of here before one of them throws a bullet at our backs."

Sandy was light-hearted as they rode away. He chortled: "You yelled like I've heard Bud yell in a fight. You get that much fun outa a gun-ruckus?"

"Today's the first time I ever mixed in shooting like this," Steve admitted, and he fell silent, pondering the heady excitement that twice today had hit him like fine whiskey, when it was fight or be killed.

Steve guessed with a new understanding that it was the same way with Bud.

AN HOUR later they were at Stoneleigh's place on the other side of the big fenced pasture. They found Guy Parker and five men saddling to ride after the rustlers. One of the Parker fence riders had been wounded by the first flurry of gunfire, and had brought warning of trouble in ahead of them.

Their arrival changed the plans. Guy stayed to talk with Steve and Sandy. The other men rode off with a wagon to bring back the body at the pasture gate. They'd repair the cut fence, try to make sure the other two fence riders were alive, and then return with the wagon.

Stoneleigh was a stocky, pleasant man with iron-gray hair and a practical calm as he worked on the wounded man's arm in the house by lamplight.

"We'll notify the sheriff, for what good it will do," said Stoneleigh calmly. "Too bad Carson had to get killed. He was a good man."

Guy Parker was an older man than Sandy. In the lamplight Guy looked tired and worried as he watched the wounded man sitting stripped to the waist, blankly staring at the floor while Stoneleigh worked on a ragged bullet wound above the right elbow.

"If this keeps up, we'll never get away with a trail herd," Guy said heavily.

Stoneleigh looked up from the bloody arm and smiled. "Have to get used to this sort of thing around here, old man. It might not happen to you again. After all, you haven't made any enemies."

Steve put in dryly: "Had this man Carson made any enemies?"

From the corner of his eye Steve saw the wounded man look up quickly. Stoneleigh shrugged. "I can't say much about Carson," he admitted. "He seemed a steady chap, willing to work for wages."

Steve's side glance marked the wounded man staring again at the floor with an expressionless face. He wondered if the fellow knew something about Carson. . . .

Later, with Guy and Sandy and Stoneleigh, Steve sat on boxes out in front of the mud-chinked ranch house and talked while they waited for the wagon to return with Carson's body.

"I'm changing plans. We'll pull out in a few days," Guy decided.

"How about the cattle Doc Watling's got for sale?" Sandy questioned.

"You and Steve look 'em over tomorrow, like you planned," said Guy. "If they look all right, buy 'em. I'll ride into Tornillo tomorrow and see about the trail crew."

Guy spat, adding heavily: "Wish we had men here from our own range. I'd feel better."

At sunrise Steve rode southwest again with Sandy to inspect the Watling cattle. They pushed the horses steadily. Around noon they crossed a bare divide, dropped down to little-used wagon ruts, and followed them west several miles to the uneasy bawling of corraled cattle near a mud-chinked, thatch-roofed *jacal*.

Waiting at the *jacal* was the gray-faced, unsmiling Doc Watling, the big grinning Nando, and a group of roughly dressed brush hands.

"Climb down an' tear a chunk of meat before you spend your cow-money!" Nando Watling hailed with a wave of his big hand.

As they dismounted, a lanky man with a drooping brown mustache stepped out of the *jacal* doorway. Something was vaguely familiar about the man. Steve turned, looking him over.

He met startled recognition in the man's glance. Without talk or warning the lanky one went for his holstered gun. Steve knew instantly it was to be a killing—and he was the victim!

THE trouble caught every man by surprise. Steve's fast jump to one side was the first warning most of them had. Then the lanky man's revolver shattered the peace.

Steve's quick move was all that saved him. His own gun was out before he stopped. He took a split instant to set himself. He'd not have another chance. Then he fired, three shots ripping in one unbroken burst.

All three bullets hit the stranger. The first one saved Steve from another shot the man fired. Steve's last two slugs beat the lanky man down into a twitching heap on the sun-baked ground.

Then Steve had his back to the *jacal* wall, his gun searching for more trouble.

Sandy yelled: "Don't anyone move!"

The Watling men scattered out, ringing the spot with drawn guns and ugly looks. A wrong move, and Steve knew that he and Sandy wouldn't have a chance to reach their horses. They were cornered.

Nando Watling shouted a warning. *"Don't nobody shoot!"*

The drawn-out instant of danger hung ready to snap as Nando Watling plunged between his men and Steve. He pointed to the huddled, now quiet body on the ground.

"Bat walked right out an' hauled his gun! What come over the damn fool?"

The tension slacked. Guns pushed back into holsters as Doc Watling knelt for a moment by the body. He stood up without a change of expression on his gray face.

"Mister, that was good shooting," said Doc Watling dryly. "Howcome it happened?"

"Ask him," said Setve shortly. "I never saw him before."

Steve said that . . . but he wondered. Something about the man still seemed familiar. He could be one of the two strangers who had ridden into the brush yesterday and started shooting.

Doc Watling's pale cold glance looked Steve over. "Bat's been in San Antone for a few days. Just got back last night. Couldn't be you tangled with him there?"

"I'd remember it."

Doc Watling shrugged. "Bat sure took a dislike to you on sight. Serves him right. Let's have a look at them cows you come to see."

That seemed to settle the matter. One of the men grinned and said that Bat must have brought back a hangover, the way he was slow with his gun. Steve walked to the nearby corral with a new idea of how lightly a killing was regarded in these parts. He was sure now that more of Bud's past was catching up with him. It was worse than being Bud, for this way danger came without warning.

After inspection of the cattle inside the dusty pole corral, Sandy said, "It's up to you, Steve. You need this many more head to top off what we've bought for you. Doc said yesterday he'd sell for nine dollars a head, delivered to Stoneleigh's pasture and road-branded there for us if we're short of help. He'll guarantee they'll pass the State Inspector."

"Sold," decided Steve.

The dead man was still on the ground under a cloud of flies when Steve and Sandy rode off. "Funny, the way that fellow went for you," Sandy commented, frowning.

"Maybe he thought I was somebody else."

"Must be some tough-looking characters in the Brasada," Sandy grinned.

Steve let it go at that. He still didn't want to talk about Bud, and when they got back to Stoneleigh's place, after dark, Sandy made it easy for him. Major Parker and Patricia had arrived.

Before entering the house Sandy suggested: "Maybe we better not talk about that shooting just yet. No use to worry Tricia and Father."

"I was thinking the same," Steve confessed. But inside the house he came under the Major's probing stare.

"Young man, you left San Antonio almighty suddenly," Major Parker stiffly greeted. "I couldn't make sense out of the reason you gave Patricia."

"I didn't give her much of any reason, I guess," Steve admitted.

"You might have been in trouble, by the way you left."

STEVE chuckled at that, but the Major's annoyance seemed to sharpen to antagonism. And a little later when Steve stepped out in front of the house with Patricia, he learned the reason.

"Steve, there was a killing the night you left San Antonio," said Patricia under her breath. "That wasn't the reason you left, was it?"

"Why, now, you know I didn't shoot anyone that night."

But Patricia was unhappy. "I know you didn't. But the next morning father had heard all about the killing before I told him you were gone. He wanted to know how you had acted. Steve, the description of one of the men who did that killing could fit you! And the way you left so suddenly. . . ."

"Looks bad, doesn't it? The Major didn't tell the Law where it could find me, did he?"

"You know he wouldn't—even if you were guilty!"

Steve patted Patricia's arm. "I'm not so sure about that. The Major don't approve of me, and he's a stickler for law and order. But I didn't shoot any man that night. . . . You're going back on the train, aren't you?"

"Guy and father want me to, but I won't," said Patricia promptly. "Father's cows may be in danger—but his daughter isn't."

The moonlight reminded Steve of Sandy's warning on the Tornillo road last

night, and of the dead man standing his gruesome watch at the pasture gate. In the moonlight at his side Tricia looked very small and lovely. Steve looked down at her and thought of the man he had killed this day, huddled unnoticed under a buzzing cloud of flies.

"You heard about the rustlers we ran into last night?"

"There's always been rustling, even at home," Patricia countered. "Don't try to scare me, Steve. I'm going home on the trail."

The next day Steve would have talked to Major Parker about it, but the Major's new curt aloofness persisted. Steve had the angry, helpless feeling that if the Major heard all the truth about the killing in San Antonio, and the killing at the Watling corral, their relations would grow even worse.

In the afternoon the Watling men came in with Steve's cattle. Nando Watling was in charge. A branding fire was lighted. All afternoon the hot, dusty work of branding went on. The Watling punchers were as hard-working a group as Steve had ever seen. Three of them, Steve noticed, had not been at the corral the afternoon before.

Late in the afternoon one of the three —a stocky bow-legged man called Hoop— stepped back from the branding fire, wiped a sleeve over his sweating face and grinned as he rolled a cigarette.

"All the way to Colorado with 'em, huh?"

Steve nodded.

Hoop had a broken nose and a chin scar showing through a rough beard stubble. He pulled on the cigarette and squinted at Steve through the smoke. "Ever been down this way before?"

"Nope," denied Steve, calm and instantly wary. Here was Bud's trail again.

Hoop inhaled again. His squint had no particular expression. "It's a nice country around here," said Hoop. "Don't have no winters to fight." Hoop scratched his jaw behind the scar and pulled the cigarette from his lip. "I'd a swore you been around these parts before, from that old brush jacket an' scratched-up brush leggin's you're wearin'."

Steve looked down at Bud's heavy leather leggings. He hadn't thought about Bud's clothes. Too often in past years he'd traded clothes with Bud. The Parker boys, Stoneleigh and the Major hadn't seemed to notice either.

"Borrowed 'em," Steve said briefly.

Hoop nodded, apparently satisfied, and went back to his work. He had, Steve guessed, left the fire on purpose to ask questions.

Any way you looked at it, the questions cut back to Bud—and probably meant trouble.

CHAPTER FOUR

Six-Shooter Sell-Out!

THE rest of the afternoon Steve stayed wary, sharp-eyed. Little things he would have missed now had meaning. He saw Hoop talking with Nando Watling, caught the burly Nando looking toward him.

Again, Steve turned, and saw Guy Parker staring at him. "Anything on your mind?" Steve called.

Guy shook his head, unsmiling.

The last O Bar trail brand was burned into the last tough hide. Stoneleigh had food ready for all hands. Before eating Steve went into the house with Nando Watling to settle the tally. Doc had not come with the others.

"Hundred and fifty-seven head, I made it," said Steve, leafing through the grimy tally book.

"That'll do," said Nando, grinning.

Steve had put gold pieces from the specie belt into both coat pockets. Nando counted with him as the bright yellow coins dropped on the table beside them.

"Seventy!" said Nando as the last gold piece dropped. He was grinning as he scooped the money together with big hands. "Any chance for some of us brush poppers to get a sackful of this if we head north?

"Hard to tell. There's money up north."

"You oughta know," said Nando gustily. He winked. "It's give Doc an idea. Them fool Texas Rangers been raising hell over in Gonzales an' De Witt Counties, an' down into Refugio an' San Patricio. They'll be around here next. Doc thinks a smart man ought to pull out before he has to fight Rangers for a living."

"Depends on the way a man makes his living, doesn't it?"

Nando's grin broadened. "There was a Ranger in Tornillo yesterday." He watched Steve closely, and when Steve made no comment, Nando let the subject drop. But he was still grinning his wise, sly grin as they went out to the cookhouse to eat.

After the Watling men rode away, Steve lingered outside in the night, wondering if the Ranger in Tornillo had been working on the matter of the dead San Antonio deputy. For the first time Steve realized how close he was to being shot or hung for Bud's desperate ways. And he couldn't take to the brush like Bud could; he had to stay here and start the trail drive back to Colorado.

Carson, the dead fence rider, had been buried out in the pasture. Today Stoneleigh and Major Parker had ridden to Tornillo to talk with the sheriff.

When they returned, Stoneleigh was bluff and cheerful. "The sheriff says he'll do what he can about Carson, which won't be much," he stated. "But he says the Governor is recruiting another troop of Rangers. That deputy marshal who was killed in San Antonio has brought an outcry for a clean-up. Honest men may have a chance around here before long."

In the low-ceilinged, lamp-lit living room, where they had joined Guy, Sandy and Patricia, Major Parker regarded Steve coldly.

"The sheriff says a Ranger was in Tornillo yesterday, asking questions."

That was all the Major said. Guy's look settled sharply on Steve. Patricia, sitting to one side, looked suddenly unhappy.

"The Rangers may help us get away from here without trouble," said Steve calmly.

"I hope so," said the Major stiffly. "We should be ready to leave in three days. Wagons will be here tomorrow. I didn't hire men for you, Harmon."

"How many men will you need?" Stoneleigh asked Steve.

"Three and myself ought to carry my share of the drive."

"I can give you names of men who might be interested," Stoneleigh offered readily.

"You could ride fast and see them all tomorrow."

"Thanks," said Steve gratefully, and he asked the Major: "Will Patricia be going over the trail?"

"I'll arange Patricia's plans for her."

In the morning Steve left early. Stoneleigh had given him six names, with directions how to find the men. Two of them, Ben Holland and Carty Smith, were the pick of the six, Stoneleigh had advised.

Holland and Smith were pardners who had been rustled flat. They were disgusted with the Brasada. Taciturn men who minded their own business, they were honest and good cowmen, with plenty of nerve.

By midafternoon Steve had found three of the men. Only the third man was willing to leave at once on a northern trail drive. He was a thin cheerful young puncher named Slim Polk, whose boss had been killed a few days back. Steve finally found Slim Polk and another man working mossy-horn steers out of a brushy bottom.

"Yup, I'll go," Slim Polk readily agreed. "Got three horses I'd like to take along."

"Bring them along to Stoneleigh's place tomorrow." Steve looked at the sun. "How's the quickest way to get to Holland and Smith's place?"

Steve memorized the rough map that Polk drew on the ground, and before it was dark he rode up to the small mud-chinked log cabin where the pardners lived miles from a neighbor.

A spotted hound barked. A windmill was pumping. The pardners were not around. Steve decided to wait, so he watered his horse, unsaddled.

When he heard the dog barking, he stood up in time to hail two approaching riders. They were Holland and Smith.

By lamplight in the cabin both men were long, lanky and deliberate in movement. Holland had a black beard and a broad Texas drawl. Smith had a long black mustache and seemed reluctant to speak at all.

"Yore proposition hits me," Holland drawled without hesitation. "Carty, how 'bout it? Won't never be a better chance to git outa this damned brush."

Smith looked at his pardner. Some silent message passed between them. Ben Holland nodded to Steve.

"We're hired," he said briefly. "Git some grub with us an' shake down here tonight. Ain't no sense startin' out now."

In the morning at breakfast Smith looked across his tin plate, cleared his throat, and spoke for the first time.

"You coulda saved a ride by speakin' to us when you was in Tornillo yesterday."

Steve gulped the food in his mouth. "I was in Tornillo yesterday?"

Ben Holland said: "We was in Doc Watling's bar while you was buyin' drinks. You musta sobered fast on the ride out here."

"Was I in Tornillo when you left last night?"

They regarded him solemnly. Ben Holland replied briefly: "Nope, not if you was here when we rode up."

Steve hurriedly finished eating.

"I'll see you at Stoneleigh's," he told them, and he saddled and left, riding fast.

So Bud hadn't gone to Mexico! Yesterday Bud had been drunk in Tornillo. . . .

THE dusty, rutted main street of Tornillo was almost deserted when Steve rode in. Doc Watling's Horn Saloon was empty of customers. Steve had never seen the red-cheeked, plump bartender now on duty. But he got a smile of recognition as he breasted the bar. And a cheerful greeting.

How you feel this morning, mister?"

"All right."

"Wonder you ain't got a head. You sure was flyin' high yesterday. . . . What'll it be?"

"What did I do yesterday?" Steve asked.

"Well, nothin' much." The bartender shook his head. "But you oughta know better'n to play poker with a skinful."

"So I played poker? Who with?"

"Don't remember things next day, huh?" The bartender chuckled. "Sometimes that's best. You got in a poker game with Doc Watling, if you got to know the worst."

"Was it that bad?"

"It's always bad playin' poker with Doc," the plump man chuckled. "An' it's twice as bad playin poker with Doc when you're drunk. Doc's always sober."

Steve nodded. He could believe that after twice meeting the gray-faced, unsmiling man.

"How much did I lose?"

"Well, I dunno about that," Reserve veiled the bartender's manner. "I keep busy here at the bar. Have a drink on the house. You got it comin'."

Steve nodded, and he put down the whiskey and stood considering for a moment. "Where's Doc Watling?"

"Couldn't say. He rode outa town early. Seems like I heard Doc say he'd see you at Stoneleigh's ranch this morning. Maybe he went there and you forgot all about it."

"Looks that way," Steve agreed, and he went out to his horse.

Bud obviously was not in Tornillo this morning. No telling where Bud might be. Bud's memory had never been too good after drinking. If Bud had said he would meet Doc Watling at Stoneleigh's place there was slight chance that Bud would be there. But he might be.

Once more Steve silently damned his twin brother. It was like Bud's sense of humor to enter Tornillo and pass himself off as Steve. It had been an old trick of Bud's when they were kids.

Steve wondered as he rode what Doc Watling would say if he reached Stoneleigh's place and suddenly faced two Steve Harmons, so alike no stranger had ever been able to tell them apart. It might jar Doc Watling out of his gray-faced reserve.

Stoneleigh's ranch house looked quiet enough. There was no sign of Doc Watling. The wounded pasture rider, arm in a sling, was loafing on a box.

"Doc Watling been by here this morning?" Steve asked the man as he rode up.

"Yep. He's out in the pasture, I guess."

Stoneleigh came out of the house just then with a bridle and a saddle blanket over one arm, and saw Steve and lifted a hand in greeting. "How d'you feel this morning, old man?"

Steve grinned a little. "All right; I see Doc Watling has been talking about yesterday."

"You might say he has," Stoneleigh agreed, and he shook his head. "Too bad. A lot of queer things happen at Tornillo."

"I wouldn't be the first man who got drunk there," Steve reminded, smiling wryly.

"No," assented Stoneleigh. He looked uncomfortable. "Perhaps I should have warned you." Stoneleigh paused, then shrugged. "You didn't seem to need warning."

"Maybe I didn't," Steve said, and he thought that Stoneleigh was looking at him queerly. "I suppose Doc Watling usually gets strangers in a card game," Steve ventured.

"Usually," Stoneleigh agreed, still looking uncomfortable.

Steve dismounted, liking the Englishman for his obvious regret over the card losses. Before anything more was said, Major Parker came out of the house. Steve braced himself for the Major's disapproval.

Then something new, strange about the Major riveted Steve's attention.

The Major had never looked more stiffly unbending. His cheeks had a hard pallor. His face had never been so set and stern.

Steve waited for the older man to speak. It was going to be unpleasant. Once more he could thank Bud for the way the Major felt about any little slip Steve seemed to make.

The Major stopped in front of Steve. His pallor was even deeper than it had seemed at first sight. A jaw muscle was jerking, as if the Major were under heavy nervous strain. But when he spoke, his voice came as precise and cold as the cut of a blade.

"Harmon, you never were any good. I should have decided so years ago! It will please me if you take your things and get out. I hope never to see you again!

STEVE pushed back his hat. "That's a little rough, for a few drinks."

"Rough!" said the Major, his voice suddenly shaking. "What do you call gambling away your ranch, your cattle and your horses? You refused to sell Horse Canyon to me and to my sons—and yet you throw everything away to scum like this Watling crowd! Now I'll have *them* for neighbors!"

For a moment Steve's mouth opened soundlessly. Then because he knew Bud and what Bud could do, the impact of it hit him. "You're sure about that, Major?"

"This man Doc Watling showed me the papers! They have the signatures of sufficient witnesses!"

"*My* name signed to the papers?"

"Yes!"

Steve drew a shaky breath. He understood Stoneleigh's pitying regret, the curious sardonic look on the wounded man's face.

"Where is Doc Watling?"

"Out in the pasture with his men and ours!" said the Major savagely. "They're cutting out your share of the drive! The Watlings wanted to drive north with us! I told them it was impossible!"

Why do they want to drive north?" Steve muttered, and then he remembered big Nando Watling's remarks the day before.

The Texas Rangers would probably be in soon to clean out the Brasada. Doc Watling had decided it would be safer and more profitable to move.

The Doc must have had the Colorado ranch in mind when Bud rode into Tornillo and got drunk. Doc Watling had worked fast, steering Bud into a crooked card game, and now had ranch, cattle,

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horses, everything the Watlings needed to settle far from the Brasada.

The Major's shaking anger continued. "We'll have no peace at the home ranch! Stoneleigh has told me all about the Watlings! To a man they're thieves and killers! You've thrown them on our doorstep with your worthless, irresponsible ways! And after refusing the more-than-fair price I offered you!"

"It looks bad," Steve muttered agreement.

The Major was not appeased. "We wouldn't have a cow left by the time we reached home if they trailed with us! They're getting what they own. I wish it were the last I were ever to see of them! And of you, too, Harmon. I can't order you from Stoneleigh's place—but I resent your presence from now on!"

The Major turned on his heel and walked back into the house. And Steve silently watched him go.

Stoneleigh spoke awkwardly. "I say, it's too bad! I understand how the old gentleman feels. But a man doesn't lose his ranch on purpose. Just want you to know there's a welcome here."

"Thanks," said Steve gratefully; and it took an effort to smile at the stocky Englishman. "I'll ride out in the pasture and talk to Doc Watling."

"Be careful," warned Stoneleigh bluntly. "I know how you must feel. But Doc Watling has six or seven of his Watling tribe with him. They evidently came expecting trouble. They'll think nothing of shooting you if you lose your head."

"I won't lose my head," said Steve, and he swung into the saddle.

Riding out into the big fenced pasture Steve somberly turned it all over in his mind. The papers Doc Watling held were not legal, with Steve's name signed by Bud. But that couldn't be proved now. Bud was not here.

And even if Bud showed up and told the truth it might not help. Bud could not prove that he had signed the papers. Only one man could back up Steve's oath that he, Steve, had not signed the papers. That man was young Slim Polk, who had directed Steve to Holland and Smith's place the afternoon before. Even with Slim Polk's testimony, it might be impossible for Steve to prove that he had not ridden straight to Tornillo from the talk with Slim Polk.

That did not help now, anyway. Doc Watling and his relatives were not going to surrender what they now had. They'd kill Steve or Bud or Slim Polk if the threat of a lawing seemed to promise trouble.

The round-up was not hard to locate. Guy and Sandy, with their men and Stoneleigh's men were helping comb the brush thickets and head all cattle and horses toward Stoneleigh's home corrals.

Behind a running group of steers Steve found two of Stoneleigh's men. They told him the Watlings were working the west side of the pasture. Two miles west Steve found Nando Watling and two of his bunch hazing a mix of horses and cows.

Nando Watling rode over with a broad, sly grin and greeting. "You sure made us a present yesterday. We're pullin' stakes for that gold-piece country."

"Where's Doc?"

"He's sorta been expectin' you," said Nando. "I'll ride with you." And as they sided each other at a fast trot, Nando slid a calculating look over another grin.

"Doc had an idea you'd be pawin' the dirt this morning. Where'd you go last night? We hear you didn't come home."

"Had other business."

"You look like you slept out," chuckled Nando. "Red-eye'll get you down. I slept twenty miles in the saddle one night afore I fell off in a patch of prickly pear. What kinda ranch did Doc win from you, anyway?"

"Supposed to be a pretty good one," said Steve briefly.

"We'll do with most anything for a headquarters," Nando stated cheerfully. "Us Watlings all stick together an' get along."

THEY found Doc Watling and two more riders leisurely crossing a broad open stretch of mesquite grass. The two riders moved in close to the graying Doc and Steve knew they were there to guard the Doc against any trouble.

Doc Watling's soft-voiced greeting was almost friendly. "We didn't wait for you

to show up, Harmon. We want to make this cut in a day so we can leave."

"I'd like to see the papers I'm supposed to have signed," Steve demanded.

"You can see 'em—but you can't touch them. The boys'll have guns on you while you're looking. We don't mean to lose these papers."

Their horses side by side, Nando and the other two men ringing them with drawn revolvers, Doc Watling took the papers from inside his broadcloth coat.

"You signed the cows first . . . then the horses, and finally your ranch," Doc said softly. "There's your writing, and witnesses under it. Them witnesses are business men in Tornillo. Satisfied?"

"I'll have a lot of argument explaining it away," said Steve colorlessly.

"More than argument," agreed Doc Watling as he put the papers back in his coat. He looked Steve over. "I offered to drive north with old Parker. He didn't like the idea. We'll pull out a day or so after him. Want a job with us? You'll come in handy helping us get settled on that Colorado place."

"You've got a hell of a nerve!"

"Call it that," said Doc softly. "The offer'll stand for awhile. You'll probably be heading out of these parts."

The Doc started to roll a cigarette. His soft voice did not change.

"The Rangers are looking for a fellow called the Nueces Kid. They think the Kid shot a man in San Antone the other day. If he's smart, he'll hit the brush."

"Any reason for telling me?"

"There's liable to be a man or so around here who's seen the Kid before. No telling when the Rangers might hear about him. That is, if the Kid raises any trouble. That mean anything to you?"

"Why should it?" said Steve, and he left them.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Bring Back Both Kinds of Bullets!"

PATRICIA was standing outside Stoneleigh's house. She had been waiting for him, Steve guessed. They knew each other too well to waste words.

"How did it happen, Steve?" she asked when he dismounted beside her. "When have you been really drunk?"

Steve smiled a little. "Yesterday, wasn't it?"

"When, before yesterday, did you ever get in a card game with strangers while you were drunk?"

"Never did," Steve admitted.

She nodded, satisfied. "That man, Slim Polk, rode in a little while ago. He told me you left him in the middle of the afternoon yesterday, Steve. You were a long way from Tornillo. You were headed for a ranch still farther from Tornillo. What they say happened after that doesn't make sense. I know you, Steve."

"Thanks," Steve said. He looked down at Patricia, wanting to take her in his arms and give comfort and take comfort.

He put the wish aside, perhaps forever. He had stopped being Steve Harmon, with a future on the Horse Canyon ranch that included a wife, a family, and happiness. For he was Bud's double, with all of Bud's wildness, guilt, trouble on his shoulders. He had no ranch, cattle, or future that promised more than a hangman's rope.

Patricia pleaded: "Steve, can't you explain?"

"'Fraid not. I wish you'd promise to go back on the train."

"I will—if you'll go back on the train with me!" said Patricia.

"I can't do that."

"Then I'm going with father and the boys. . . . Steve, what are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Stop worrying about me," said Steve almost curtly.

Tricia flushed, and just then the Major stepped out of the house and settled anything else they might have said.

"Patricia, go inside at once!" ordered the Major in his iciest manner.

The girl hesitated, and when Steve said nothing she went silently, angry pride in her straightened shoulders and head.

The Major stalked after her.

The wounded pasture rider had moved to the shady side of the bunkhouse. Steve led his horse back there. "Where's that Slim Polk I hired?"

"Out'n the pasture. He'll hire with Major Parker if his job with you has blowed up. I shoulda told him he'd be

a damn fool to go with the Parkers' herd."

"Why?"

"Takin' a herd over to the Pecos is bad enough any time. What'll it be with the Watlings trailing close behind? And their herd road-branded the same as the Parker herd? Hell, they're apt to kill off the Parkers an' take everything."

"You get ideas," said Steve slowly.

THE wounded man shifted on the box and grinned thinly. "*You* better not get ideas. Look what happened to Carson. He had a little feud with Nando Watling. Tyin' a dead man up like that is Nando's mark."

"Sandy Parker and I left Nando Watling in Tornillo."

"There's a handful of short-cuts outa Tornillo this way if you know the brush. Nando was probably laughin' at you while he was talkin', and figuring how many of your cattle he'd have before morning. He was probably fogging out of Tornillo one way while you two went out the other way."

The wounded man spat. "I'd hate to be in your boots. You think them Watlings mean for you to get outa this alive? And maybe show up in Colorado to make trouble over your ranch? Hell! They don't work that way. Doc's sitting purty now. He'll cut all the hay in sight while he's got the chance."

"I wouldn't be surprised," Steve agreed, turning the horse.

The first cattle were coming in sight when Steve stopped by the house and called to Stoneleigh.

"I'm riding on some business," Steve told the Englishman. "I'd like you to tell Slim Polk he's on my pay until I tell him different. That goes for Holland and Smith, too."

"Glad to tell them."

Steve hesitated. "You might warn Major Parker to change his road brands. He might lose a good many head if the two herds cross the Pecos together."

"That's a fact," Stoneleigh agreed shrewdly. "Anything else I can do?"

"Nothing," Steve decided. "I'm on my own now, I guess."

It was past noon when Steve once more rode into Tornillo. Bud was on his mind. Bud hadn't come to Tornillo merely to get drunk. Bud had had some reason for not riding fast across the Rio Grande into Mexico. Bud had not gone to Stoneleigh's ranch. Sober, Bud might come back into Tornillo for another drink.

But the fat bartender in the Horn Saloon merely asked: "Find Doc Watling?"

"Had a talk with him," Steve said, and he had a whiskey and walked out under the stares of several men who must have seen Bud drinking yesterday.

The whiskey was no help to the baffled resentment as Steve searched for Bud in the other saloons. He had no appetite but he stopped at the restaurant where he had eaten the day before. Among the horses at the hitchrack was a big, tar-black horse like the one Bud's friend had ridden along the dusty San Antonio street.

BUD had called the man Brawley. When Steve walked in, Brawley was eating at the back end of the counter. He looked up as the door opened.

He picked up the rifle leaning against the counter, and came toward the door, speaking one word out of the beard-stubble, for Steve's ear alone.

"Outside!"

In the street Steve spoke first. "Where's Bud?"

"Don't know the feller. Dammit, Kid, you played the fool yesterday. Let's get outa here!"

Brawley did not know Bud's real name. He thought Steve was Bud. At the moment it was better to let him keep thinking so.

"Go where?" asked Steve.

"Back to camp. You know Bat Sanders is thick with these Watlings. When you didn't come back last night, I was sure they got you, an' come into town this morning to see. And what do I hear? A feller of your description is on a big drunk yesterday—an' a Texas Ranger has been in town lookin' around. Let's get back to camp!"

"Suits me," said Steve, certain now where he would find Bud sooner or later.

Brawley made a comment as they left town. "Where'd you get that roan? I thought you left him with old Randy, in San Antone."

"Friend rode him to Tornillo."

Brawley nodded; and only Brawley could have headed into the brush, following only vague cow trails, and come in miles of riding to a grassy opening beside a sluggish thread of water.

A pack horse and a saddle horse were staked near smoldering camp fire embers, and Brawley yanked out his rifle and suspiciously muttered: "There's your other horse, Kid! Who rode him here?"

Steve lifted his voice. "Come out, Bud, damn you!"

"Coming," answered Bud's voice cheerfully, and Bud walked out of the brush with his rifle.

Brawley dismounted, grumbling: "No tellin' about strangers. He coulda shot—" Brawley broke off, took a good look at Bud and his head swiveled to Steve.

"I ain't been drinkin'!" Brawley gasped. "But, by Gawd, there's two of you!"

Steve's pent-up anger burst out at Bud's chuckling. In front of the dazed Brawley, Steve damned Bud for what Bud had done the day before, telling Bud everything.

For once Bud was taken aback. He remembered little of what had happened in Tornillo. "I'm sorry, Steve."

Steve threw back savagely: "What good does that do me now! Why didn't you keep going into Mexico?"

Bud poured coffee from a pot on the smoldering embers and gulped the black liquid.

"I got worried about you," said Bud across the empty tin cup. "This Tornillo country ain't healthy for me, Steve. I thought I'd better stay close to you."

Bud put the cup on the ground and looked down at his hands. "They've made me plenty of gun trouble. I never thought they'd do it with a pen."

And frowning, Bud continued: "These Watlings are mean. Doc Watling's a snake. I hear another snake named Bat Sanders has thrown in with 'em. I made Bat walk yellow in San Antone, but he's laying for me. I was afraid you'd run onto him."

"I did, at one of the Watling corrals. Sanders is dead. He didn't have time to call your name to the Watlings. But if I read sign right, a bow-legged, broken-nosed rider with the Watlings knows the Nueces Kid. Doc Watling thinks I'm the Kid."

"I remember that Hoop Chase from Mexico. He's snaky, too," Bud grumbled. "Steve, I'm sure sorry. Want me to ride into Tornillo an' swear to the truth about them papers?"

"You think that'll do any good, now?"

"Nope," decided Bud, more ruefully. "Texas Rangers after either one of us they ketch first, an' the Watlings set to hold what they've got. It's a purty, ain't it? I'll have to kill Doc Watling, take them papers away from him and tear them up."

"Which is what he's expecting!" snapped Steve. "You'll get shot by the men around him. Use your head."

"I still got a headache," grumbled Bud.

Steve said, "Major Parker's pulling out soon. If I read sign right on the Watlings, they mean to follow on his heels with the same road brand. If the Major gets to Colorado alive, he'll be lucky. If he gets there with half his heard, it'll be a miracle.

"Patricia is going with them. God knows what may happen to her with the Watlings on the prowl."

Bud looked at Steve and then spoke softly. "Can't let her or her folks get hurt, can we? What can we do?"

"Ride into Tornillo with me. We won't need Brawley."

"You're the boss," stated Bud promptly.

On that ride the years rolled away, and they might once more have been boys on

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the Horse Canyon ranch. But when they rode into Tornillo, Bud's face became a mask, his eyes studying every man who moved on the street. And when Steve led the way into the Horn Saloon, Bud paused in the swinging doors and made certain who was in the long shadowy room.

"What'll it be? inquired the pudgy bartender; and then he saw Bud breast the bar at Steve's side, his jaw dropped and his pink face took on Brawley's stunned look.

"Whiskey," ordered Steve briefly, and he ignored the barman's wildly questioning look.

They drank. Steve paid, walked out with Bud before the bartender or any of the customers had courage to question the two armed strangers who looked exactly alike.

"What now?" Bud asked.

"Go back to camp and wait, if you're helping the Major get north. That's all I want now."

"Have it your way," said Bud. "We'll be at camp."

Night was dropping when Steve reached Stoneleigh's ranch. The Watlings were gone with Steve's share of the trail drive. Ben Holland and Smith and Slim Polk were there, and riders were holding Major Parker's cattle and horses in close to the ranch house. Supplies were being loaded on a chuck wagon. Bed-wagon axles were being greased. Hurried preparation for the trail was visible on every side.

Stoneleigh explained to Steve, "Major Parker decided to leave in the morning." And then he added: "He's not taking time to rebrand."

"It may not matter," said Steve, and he unsaddled the jaded roan and called together the three men he had hired. "Working for me may be dangerous," he told them. "You're free to hire with Major Parker."

Ben Holland stroked his black beard. "What kinda danger?"

"The Watlings."

Holland looked at his silent partner, and again some message passed between them. Holland drawled: "The Watlings have already cleaned us out. We ain't afeard of them. Sure you need us? You ain't got a herd to drive now."

"I can buy another. How about you, Slim?"

"Major Parker don't exactly need any of us," said Slim Polk. "I got an idea who killed that rancher I worked for. He was a nice feller, too. I feel mighty sorry for his wife. You hired me. I'm with you. I ain't a bad shot, either."

Steve grinned at the three. "Can't tell you what might happen. Slim, you feel like riding to Tornillo tonight? You can come back in the morning."

"Sure. What'll I do?"

"Stay sober. You might drop word around Doc Watling's bar that you've hired out to me for a trail trip north, and you're waiting while I see about another herd. Don't speak about Major Parker leaving in the morning. But let drop I'm riding to your old boss' ranch tomorrow to see if his wife's got cattle for sale."

Holland and Smith looked at each other and studied Steve with sharpened interest. Slim scratched his ear, grinned uncertainly. "That all?"

"That's enough if you do it right. Be back early and tell me what's happening in town. Here's five dollars to eat on."

Carty Smith dug a gold piece out of his vest pocket and spoke briefly. "Here's ten. Bring me'n Ben both kinds of ca'tridges."

"Good idea," decided Steve at once. "Here's another ten for the same thing."

CHAPTER SIX

Scattergun Welcome!

LATE into the night preparations for leaving continued. Sandy Parker stopped for an awkward word with Steve.

"I hate it to turn out this way, Steve. What are you going to do?"

"Can't say," Steve said truthfully. "I hope you folks get through all right."

"We'll do all right if the Watlings aren't at our heels. Don't know what we'll do when they settle on your Horse Canyon range."

"That's a long way off," said Steve, and it was all he could say.

Later Patricia came out. "Will I see you in Colorado, Steve?"

"Don't know."

Patricia looked up at him. "I've been talking to father. Is Bud still alive?"

Steve waited before he said: "Yes."

"Oh, Steve! Bud did this, didn't he?"

"Doesn't matter. It's done."

"It does matter!" Patricia reached for his hand, held it tightly. "Always it's been Bud. Don't try to protect him now! Something can be done!"

Steve held her hand, and he was positive. "I can't do as much with the Watlings as your father can do. And the best he can do is get away from them fast."

"Isn't there any law here?" demanded Patricia rebelliously.

"Not much that can help me."

"Because of Bud!" she burst out resentfully. "Now I know who must have shot that man in San Antonio!"

"Forget it," Steve advised almost gruffly. "What's done is done."

"It's always been 'forget it' when Bud does it!" said Patricia in a stifled voice, and close to tears she left him.

The feel of Tricia's small hand stayed on in Steve's. Her memory would always stay with him. But he had to let her go. A broke cowhand or a dead man was nothing to offer Patricia Parker.

He was still alone, outside, when Major Parker came to him.

"So it's Bud, Steve? And you'll do nothing about it?"

"Bud has his good points."

"So has the devil, they say," stated the Major. "Come home with us."

"I've business here."

The Major dropped a hand on Steve's shoulder. They stood in silence. "I'm sorry," the Major said finally. "Good-bye, Steve. And good luck."

That helped a little. . . . In the dawn Steve watched the trail drive leave Stoneleigh's pasture and head for the endless horizons. Major Parker and Patricia drove off in a two-horse buggy; the last dust drifted away and they were gone.

Stoneleigh spoke to Steve as they turned back to the house. "I wish them luck. They'll need it."

"How many honest men live in these parts?" asked Steve reflectively.

"Quite a few. When the Watlings clear out, they'll have a chance. Doc Watling has held the bad ones together around Tornillo. Once Doc is gone, with Nando Watling and a few of the worst ones, honest people will show their hands."

Steve nodded, and a little later when Slim Polk rode in, Steve met him at the corral.

"I sure got noticed when I let out I was workin' for you," Slim chuckled. "Doc Watling come over primed with questions. He wanted to know what you aimed to do with hired hands."

"Did you tell him I was going to see the rancher's widow today?"

"Uh-huh. He acted like it was something to think over. The Watlings are aiming to get a trail herd together fast and pull out. Nando an' some of the others was having a last big drunk. Nando's taking the first herd. Doc aims to stay behind and follow later with another herd. Nando was totin' a quart of whiskey an' singin' about the land of gold and honey waiting for the Watlings up north."

In the early sunlight Slim looked queerly at Steve. "Doc wanted to know if there was two of you around the ranch here. He says two of you was in the saloon yesterday."

Slim reached for tobacco sack and papers. "Nando was mighty interested in when the Parkers aimed to leave. I told him four-five days."

"Good. Get some grub, Slim, and saddle your best horse."

The sun was not two hours high when Ben Holland, his silent partner, Slim Polk and Steve rode away from the ranch. Smith broke his silence with a drawling remark.

"So we're lookin' at cattle today?"

"If nothing happens," Steve replied.

They rode to a trail striking off south through the brush, and Steve reined up.

"Here's your way to the place. You three tie your horses out of sight of the house and lay low until I get there and call for you. Keep your eyes open. Don't be seen by anyone!"

STEVE continued on some miles, and cut off into the brush toward a hogback ridge. In another hour he had cut the sluggish thread of water that he sought; he followed the water up until without warning he rode into the grassy

opening where Bud and Brawley were camped.

The horses were staked ready. But and Brawley had stepped out of sight when they heard his approach. They came back into the open, uncocking their rifles, and Bud said: "You'd been easy if we were lookin' for you."

"I'd have Injun-walked on you if you were looking for me," Steve retorted, dismounting. "All right, Bud, let's go. Brawley, too, if he's willing. You won't need that pack horse."

"Where we going?" asked Bud, turning for his saddle.

"Going to look at some cattle a widow-woman's got for sale."

"You're buying all over again, huh? I'll buy for you, Steve. I got money."

"I won't want your money, Bud. The Major started north this morning, trying to keep ahead of the Watlings. They'll be after him fast when they find out."

Bud shrugged; but when they rode from the hidden camp, Bud hopefully suggested: "Maybe you aim to hustle off a few head on the side."

"I don't. This is an honest ride."

Brawley looked disappointed and grumbled: "I figured there'd be some kind of trouble, mebbe with the Watlings. But they got all they wanted from you, didn't they?"

"It'd seem that way," agreed Steve. "But a smart man like Doc Watling looks ahead. He's heard that Bud and I were in his bar yesterday and a man couldn't tell us apart. Doc's brainy enough to wonder what'll happen if he has to prove which one of us signed those papers. He might figure it was easiest to beat the Law to an argument and settle everything by killing Bud and me before the Watlings pull out."

Bud slapped his leather legging. "So *that's* why I rode into town for one drink an' rode out? Steve, a hundred dollars gold says the Doc has heard where you aim to look at cattle today."

"Man who works for me did say something about it in Tornillo last night," Steve admitted gravely.

Bud's laughter was carefree as he drew his rifle from the saddle boot and made sure the magazine was full.

"Hear that, Brawley? He laid the bait where the Doc'll hunt him up and start trouble! Steve don't mean for the Watlings to follow the Parkers! We're riding into a wolf-fight that'll be something!"

"You're guessing," corrected Steve mildly. "We're looking for cows. If there's any law-breaking, we won't start it."

"Sure," agreed Bud, grinning. "Steve, if you'd stay with me, we'd run the Brasada!"

Steve told Bud and Brawley about the three men he had sent ahead to the widow's ranch.

"I don't know much about them," Steve confessed. "They're the best I could hire. Keep your eyes peeled for them. I'll ride ahead and talk with the widow. You two stay back out of sight unless I call for you."

Bud protested: "If the Watlings catch you riding out alone, they'll cut you down like a lame rabbit."

"They'd want both of us first," Steve declared positively. "One of us won't do them much good. I'll see if the widow has had any visitors. Chances are the Watlings aren't bothering with us today."

Bud grumbled, but he dropped back with Brawley and let Steve push on ahead.

Like Stoneleigh, the dead rancher had built of upright logs, mud-chinked, low, with corrals out back. When Steve surveyed it from the edge of the brush, pale wood smoke drifted from the cookhouse pipe. As Steve rode to the house he noticed gay flowers the widow had planted, and he wondered how much happiness this lonely thorny-brush ranch had repaid her work and hope.

He knocked and smiled as the door opened. For an instant he remained smiling as he looked into Nando Watling's broad grin and the double-barreled shotgun that Nando was centering on his chest.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Brasada Showdown!

NANDO said jovially, "Step in. We been waitin' for you. Don't drop your hands or I'll blow you in chunks."

Doc Watling was there, and eight other

men, including the bow-legged Hoop; and with them was the gaunt, unsmiling widow whose husband had probably been killed by these same men who had invaded her house. One man was watching her.

Still jovial, Nando closed the door. "We left Tornillo early. Get his guns, boys. Hold his arms. He's tricky."

Doc Watling, still wearing neat broadcloth, had no particular expression as he stepped close, eyed Steve narrowly, and shook his head.

"Can't tell which is which," Doc said, baffled. "If half a dozen men hadn't seen them together, I wouldn't believe it was possible." And he asked Steve: "Where's the other one?"

"Other who?"

Doc Watling hit Steve's mouth with the heel of his hand, mashing lips against teeth so that they bled. Two men held Steve's arms.

"You listen to me," said Doc softly as ever. His eyes had an unblinking stare that lacked even anger.

Steve spat blood. His smile was gone. He felt hard and ugly as he answered Doc. "Keep talking, damn you!"

Doc hit him again, grunting with effort. It mashed Steve's nose, drove his upper lip between the upper teeth. Groggily Steve saw the widow open her mouth as if she had cried out in silent pity.

"I don't know which one of you is which," said Doc, breathing harder. "But I mean to have the man who played cards with me and signed them papers, and the other one of you, also. Which is which?"

Steve shook blood from his face. "I'd have more sense than to play cards with a crook like you. I didn't sign any papers. If you think the Rangers can do anything about it, call 'em."

"We'll do better than the Rangers," Doc promised.

"Lemme work on him," said Nando in the same jovial manner. "He don't know how I got my mind set on that Colorado land." Nando's slap on Steve's shoulder might have been friendly. "We mean to have us a time up north there. First off, we'll put on plenty of fat meat outa that Parker herd." Nando winked at Steve. "I aim to put my private brand on one little heifer in that herd. I sized her up yesterday. She'll do to take along."

Steve spat blood in Nando's broad face. "You low-down dog! You man enough to take me on alone?"

Nando's big fist knocked Steve against the men who held him.

"Leggo him!" Nando yelled, smearing the red blood off his face with a sleeve and jerking a horn-handled knife from his belt. "I'll cut his damn throat!"

Doc Watling's colorless voice dropped across the big man's rage like a cold, sharp blade. "Nando, you ain't killing no one until we get both of them together!"

Nando stepped back, breathing hard, still holding the knife, and Steve knew he had never been closer to a slit throat. And still was. Bud and Brawley had watched him enter the house, evidently thinking he was safe.

Ben Holland, Carty Smith, Slim Polk, should be out there, too, waiting for word from him, unless they had blundered into the Watlings. Steve was wondering about them when he heard the gunshots.

He was instantly forgotten as Nando Watling jumped for the door, swearing.

"That's Pete with the horses! Somebody snuck up on him!" Other men followed him, and outside Nando roared: "Here comes Pete, all shot up!"

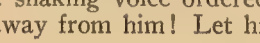
Doc Watling spoke harshly to the two men holding Steve. "Keep him in here! Kill him if he makes any trouble!"

Another rifle shot stabbed the sunlight outside, then another, and the Watling guns crashed back in answer.

Doc Watling cursed and ran out.

The man holding Steve's arm wrestled him across to the side window, swearing, demanding: "Who's out there?"

Gunshots were coming from the brush. A bullet dropped the staggering man. The Watlings were dodging across the open, shooting as they moved. And as the two men guarding Steve wrenched him away from the window so they could look out, a shaking voice ordered: "You two get away from him! Let him go!"



THEY had left the ranch-widow unguarded. She had caught up the shotgun Nando had abandoned for a rifle. She was gaunt, pale with desperate purpose as she aimed the shotgun.

The man at Steve's left arm snarled: "She wants the same thing I give her old man an' she'll get it!"

Both shotgun barrels erupted in a blast that shook the low-ceilinged room. The full charges struck the man's chest. He was dying as he plunged against Steve.

Steve's right arm was released. The gun muzzle against his back went away, and then at Steve's side the gun spat.

Steve was already moving as the woman stumbled and dropped the shotgun. He wheeled, slapping his right hand on the big Colt still leveled at his side. His thumb jammed in under the gun hammer as it dropped for a second shot. The metal gouged into the thumb and Steve got his other hand on the gun and wheeled on around, tearing the gun away.

He took a blow on his face as his shoulder drove the Watling man back into the window, shattering the glass.

The man made a wild grab and yelled with fear as the gun muzzle went hard into his middle. Steve thought of the woman this man had shot, and the husband she had already lost, and he pulled the trigger twice.

The woman was on her knees in the middle of the floor, both hands against her side where the bullet had entered. Graying hair straggled over her gaunt face and she was smiling.

"Ain't going to be so hard living, now that I shot the right man!" And she fainted.

A bullet tore through the mud chinking. Outside a man shouted: "Back in the house, boys, get your breath! They're all around us!"

Steve shoved fresh cartridges in the gun and shouldered out through the doorway.

A bullet grooved Steve's shoulder, shocking, numbing—and he yelled with high satisfaction as his own lead drove the Watling man reeling against the house.

Bud's whoop of encouragement lifted from the brush.

Steve grabbed the dead man's six-shooter and ran to the corner of the house, gun in each hand. Three of the Watlings were down. Two more were down inside the house. Five were left, still out in the open, where they met cross shooting from the brush front and from the back.

The horses had stampeded out of sight. Big Nando and the Doc were among the five men starting back to the house.

Nando saw Steve first and opened fire with his rifle. Doc Watling looked thin and pallid with rage as he halted, started hammering with his side gun.

Steve cut loose with a yell as he saw the broken-nosed Hoop Chase drop his gun and fold. The hot excitement of it again was driving through blood and nerves. Big Nando rocked as a bullet found him; then he started a lurching run toward the nearest brush.

Doc Watling hesitated only an instant and followed, and the other two men broke and ran, too.

Steve took careful aim, resting the gun-barrel on his arm, and dropped the rear man, and then both his guns were empty. He was feverishly reloading when the Watling men disappeared into the brush and he saw Bud run across the clearing.

"Stay back, Bud!" Steve shouted.

Bud waved his revolver and kept on. With one gun loaded, Steve started running, too. Bud vanished in the brush a hundred yards from where Nando and the Doc had entered, and Steve ran directly after the two men.

Bud was somewhere off to his right, angling through the brush to head Nando and the Doc off. Off to the left, toward the back of the clearing, would be Ben Holland, Carty Smith, Slim Polk, who had evidently stampeded the Watling horses and opened up when the Watlings ran out of the house.

Nando and the Doc were trying to lose themselves in the thorn thickets ahead. Steve heard brush crackle ahead and kept on. Then he burst through a tangle of thorny bushes into a high mass of giant prickly pear. And there big Nando Watling was waiting for him with a leveled rifle, behind the thick cactus.

Nando's face and hands were thorn-slashed and bleeding. Not grinning now, his broad face was dark with fury as the rifle lined on Steve.

THE rifle bullet drove just over Steve's scalp as he dove forward into the thorn-studded cactus. A second bullet smashed wet cactus pulp over his face and struck the ground behind him.

They were not twenty feet apart, the thorny barrier rising between them. As the second bullet missed, Steve heaved up through the thorns and faced big Nando who was plunging through the cactus toward him.

The rifle must have been empty, for Nando hurled the weapon at Steve and snatched the short gun from his belt.

"Hold it!" Steve warned harshly, and only wasted words. Thorn-slashed, too, and bleeding, he drove lead through the pulpy cactus leaves into the renegade's bull-like rush. It did not stop even as Nando's hand-gun opened at him. Then the big man threshed down in the cactus.

In a crouch Steve heard his name shouted off to the left. He answered, moved back into the brush. Ben Holland and Slim Polk came to him, their fingers on gun triggers.

"Carty's dead," said Ben Holland. "Them men got here before we did. Carty heard the horses back in the brush and we eased over to look. That Pete Watling shot Carty without no warning, and then run for the house when we opened up on him. Soon as I seen who it was, I knowed trouble had busted. When all them Watlings come outa the house, we knew what to do." Ben Holland looked askance at Steve. "I thought I seen two of you at one time, back there in the open."

"My brother," Steve said. "He was hiding out across the clearing with a pardner. He's ahead of us somewhere. Doc Watling's ahead. Nando's down in a patch of prickly pear just over there. I think he's dead. Didn't want to look until I was sure. You'll have to be right over him before you see him."

"If he ain't dead, he will be," promised Ben Holland with flat determination. "An' a cactus patch is just the place for him!"

Some distance to the north a gun went off, a flurry of shots followed, died out.

"Bud's found Doc Watling!" Steve guessed. "Wait'll I make sure Nando won't be after us!"

The prickly pear was quiet. Gun cocked, Steve edged in, sighted a motionless boot and a moment later saw Nando Watling, face down and still. Steve left him there, led the other men at a run toward the sound of the shots.

He risked shouting to Bud and got no answer. More warily they spread out and advanced. Slim Polk, off to the right, suddenly called: "Here they are!"

He was with Bud a moment later, in a grassy opening in the thorn brush. Doc Watling was there, too, and the story could be read.

Doc Watling had crossed the opening and, like Nando, had waited with cocked rifle for the man following him. Doc had shot Bud, and Bud had run at him, shooting. Doc Watling had turned to run. One of Bud's bullets had struck the Doc's back and dropped him. Bud had collapsed a few feet away and clawed through the grass and dirt until he reached Doc.

Bud had lived to search the Doc's pockets. Bud was lying there now beside the Doc, quite peacefully, with the hint of a smile on his face and one blood-smeared hand holding papers he had taken from the Doc's coat pocket.

Steve knelt by Bud, looking down in Bud's face, and thinking back through the years. A lump crowded into his throat. Bud had laughed his way through all the wildness; and now Bud was smiling, as if to say it was all right.

Steve took the papers from Bud's hand, and looked at his name Bud had written on them for a joke, while drinking. Slowly Steve thumbed a match and watched the papers burn, and he put a hand on Bud's quiet shoulder for a moment.

Steve was calm as he stood up in the silence.

"One of them shot the widow-woman," Steve told Holland and Slim Polk. "We'll have to get back to her. You feel like riding, Slim?"

"Sure!"

"Ride to Stoneleigh's and tell him to get the sheriff and a doctor, then spread the word around among honest people that they've got a real chance to take hold now."

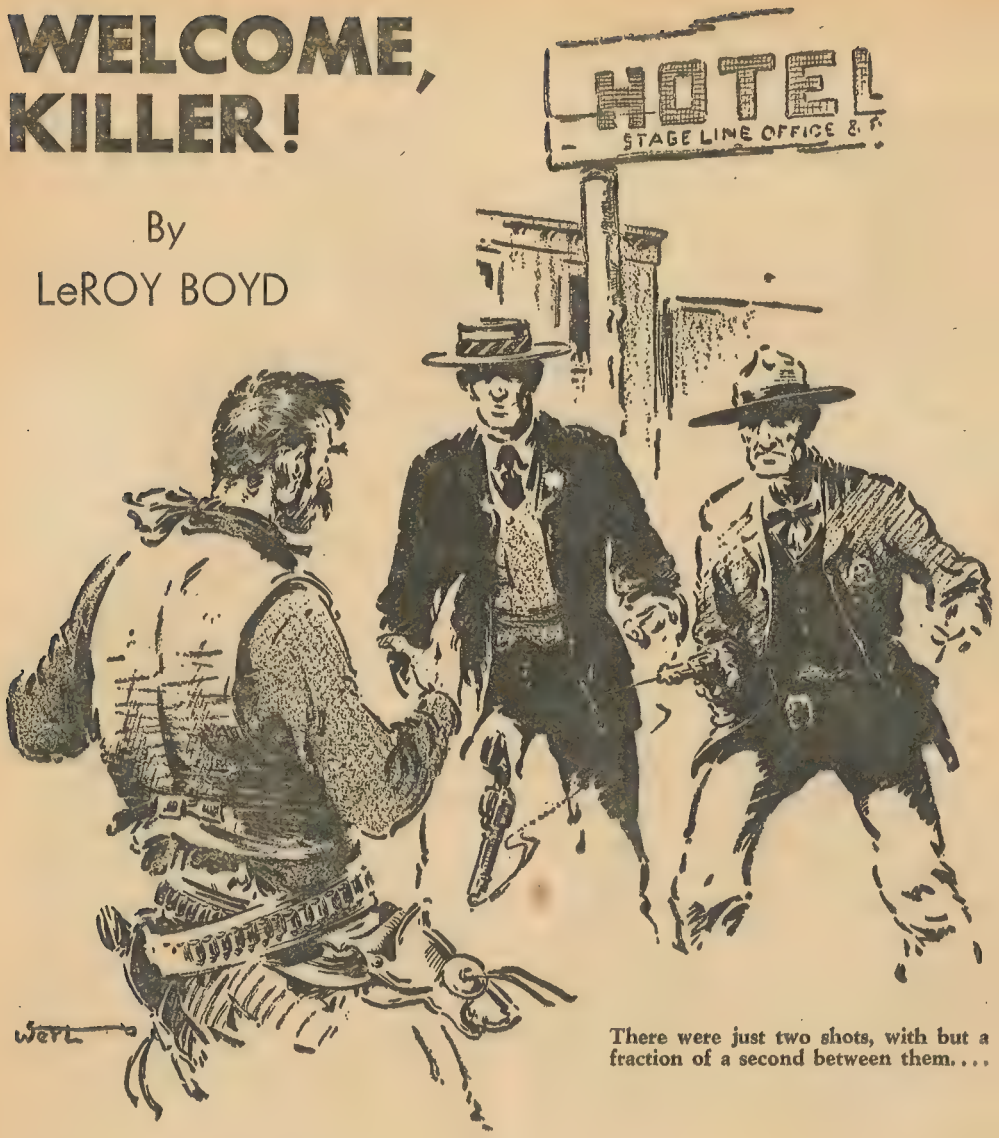
Slim waited while Steve looked down at Bud for a last moment; then they started back to the ranch house.

Steve said: "Ride and catch the Parkers. Tell them what happened and that Watlings won't trouble them now. Tell them I'll be following them up the trail to Horse Canyon!"

THE END

WELCOME, KILLER!

By LeROY BOYD



There were just two shots, with but a fraction of a second between them. . . .

Square Deal Colby started the whole town laughing when, as a joke, he inveigled old Sandy Oakes, broken derelict, to don the badge and gun of the famous Marshal Stevens—who was slated for a hot-lead finish when the San Antone' badman hit the wild little cowtown of Tasajera!

THE only excuse for the existence of Tasajera was that it gave the map-makers an opportunity to add another name to their charts. But on the tenth of July, 1872, certain events were taking place which would, for a brief space of time, skyrocket some citizens of that dusty little cowtown into a blaze of gunsmoke fame—and a measure of glory.

At that particular moment, Square Deal Colby, a gambler at the Lost Hope Saloon in Tasajera, felt bored and was willing to spend a dollar or so to add color and ex-

citement to what he considered was a drab and uninteresting day.

While down San Antone' way, one Frick Bradley decided that the best way to mend a badly shattered reputation as a tough gun-hand was to ride up to Tasajera and put as many bullets as possible into the body of Marshal Matt Stevens. Marshal Stevens was the law in that part of the Territory—a straight-shooting badge-toter who rated right along with such men as Bat Masterson, Bill Tilghman, Wyatt Earp and others.

Neither Frick Bradley nor the gray-mustached marshal knew that a young man named Bruce Oakes, having graduated that June as an engineer from a famous Eastern technical college, was even then completing the first lap of a stage trip which would bring him to Tasajera—and a twenty-four hour stop-over. Bruce Oakes was looking forward to that interlude in his west-bound trip with a strange combination of pleasure and dread.

Bruce Oakes, his fellow stage passengers, as well as the driver of the Concord were all quite unaware that a flash flood had weakened a wooden cross-beam of the bridge over Washita Canyon. Yet that was a fact which would carry its full share of importance in the history of Tasajera.

And at the same time that Square Deal Colby was wearying dealing himself cold poker hands and had almost decided to try other divertissement, old Sandy Oakes was sitting alone at a table in the back room of the Lost Hope, rereading the letter from the boy he hadn't seen for fifteen years. . . .

* * *

The words of the letter began to blur as if something from old Sandy's eyes had suddenly fallen on the ink.

He folded the dog-eared piece of paper carefully and slipped it back in the envelope. Then he glanced about the big barroom where he had long held forth as swamper—so insignificant a figure in the life of the town, that if he had died in his sleep some night, no one outside the three or four who depended upon his services would have noticed his absence.

It was early in the afternoon, and the place was for the moment without customers. The bartender lazily watched the antics of a fly. At the piano Belle—only the Lord knew her last name any more—slowly fingered the keys and hummed a currently popular tune. Square Deal Colby sat at his green covered table absently riffling the deck of cards.

It wasn't in the nature of Sandy to bother anybody with his troubles, but this matter was so big he needed help—or at least some advice.

Accordingly, he swallowed his timidity and got to his feet. He shuffled over and dropped down on a chair opposite Square Deal.

The smoke from a cigarette dangling at Square Deal's mouth drifted upward, causing him to close an eye. The other one, however, fixed a coldly questioning gaze on Sandy.

Sandy noisily cleared his throat. "Just got a letter from my son," he announced.

Square Deal continued his expert manipulation of the deck. "Didn't know you had a son."

The small measure of pride that was still in Sandy swelled like a balloon so that it seemed to press against the walls of his chest.

"Uh-huh. Boy's just finished college. Now he's going up to Virginia City to work in a mine."

Square Deal began to flick out a couple of practice hands of stud, dropping Sandy's near the center of the table where he could keep an eye on it.

"Ain't seen him since he was eight years old," Sandy continued. "When his ma died I had to send him back East to live with an aunt. They sent him through school and made a gentleman of him. . . . Hard to think of the little tyke being growed up."

The tinkle of the piano and Belle's song stopped.

Sandy's voice halted too, as if what he had to say was hard to get out, and the silence in the room became as somnolent as that of the siesta hour. "The boy's going to stop off and see me on his way up to the mines," he said finally. "That's what he said in the letter."

Square Deal might have been bluffing with a pair of deuces for all the features of his face changed. His long, slender, white fingers raked in the cards and stacked them in a neat pile. He growled: "What am I supposed to do—cry?"

He didn't notice how deeply that struck Sandy, or apparently he didn't care. He got up, walked over to the bar, and stirred the bartender to reluctant activity by ordering a drink.

SANDY slumped farther down on his chair, his body as dumpy as a sack of potatoes. He stared blankly at the deck Square Deal had left behind him, and the outlines of it became blurred and indistinct before his gaze.

He seemed unaware that Belle had come over and taken Square Deal's chair. Not until she spoke did he pull himself from the web of his thoughts.

"Old Stony Face ain't as hard as he tries to make out," Belle said.

Sandy said nothing, but he warmed with appreciation, like a homeless collie trying to show its gratitude for a sympathetic word.

"What's your kid's name?"

"Bryce."

"Pretty, ain't it? You know, I had a son once, too. Named him Cecil. That's a hell of a name, come to think of it. If he's still alive. . . . " She paused, and the far away look that came into her eyes went past Sandy to fasten on the wall across the room.

Sandy had never regarded her as other than one of the fixtures of the place—like the bar, the tables and chairs, the lamps. But now, looking closely at her, he perceived the lines of the years which she had tried to cover with makeup, and he sat up and straightened back his shoulders. They had something in common; he felt a kinship with the woman.

But the flame of manhood which that thought fanned flickered feebly. His body began to sag again.

"The lad's coming to Tasajera," he said, "and. . . : "

"Bet you'll be glad to see him."

"No—I won't!"

The hardness which life had given her crept back into her voice, and the cynical mask returned to her face. "How so?"

"I've lied to the boy. Didn't want him ashamed of me, so I wrote him as how I was marshal here all these years. Told him I was as big a man as Hickok. Now he'll come here and find out the truth—that his dad's just a—a bum!"

Belle's narrowed eyes scrutinized his ragged, shabby clothes and his shaggy beard and hair. She glanced swiftly at the immaculate broadcloth and linen of Square Deal, then returned her gaze to Sandy.

"You're a fool," she said harshly, "if you think that you're *goin'* a swamper'll make any difference with the boy! You're his father, ain't you?"

Sandy jerked as if a bullet had struck him in the pit of the stomach, and like a wounded wild animal, he blindly struck back. "Would you want *your* son to come see *you?*" He paused, waved a hand in a broad sweep to take in the room, and added: *"Here?"*

Before Belle could reply, he scrambled to his feet. His shoulders drooped wearily as he made his way to the back door and out to go to the dilapidated shack where he slept of nights. . . .

For a few minutes after he was gone Belle sat there staring into space. Then she got up and walked over to where Square Deal stood at the bar.

"I want to borrow a hundred dollars," she said.

Square Deal's fingers toyed with his whiskey glass. "Quite a bit of money, ain't it? What you want it for?"

Belle's voice was brittle as she told him.

"Too much, Belle. You don't give the price of a thoroughbred for an old plug."

Square Deal regarded her humorously for a moment. Out of the depths of his boredom arose a twinkle to flash in his eyes. "No," he said finally. "Damned if I lend it to you. This hand's interesting enough to make me want to play it myself. So. . . . Just call on me for what you want."

WITH the unreasoning cruelty of small towns, Tasajera entered enthusiastically into the grim joke of making Sandy Oakes a king for a day—for the day that his son would visit him.

No ukase was needed to bring the residents into line; word was passed along the street that Belle wanted it, and that was enough.

The townsmen found, too, a certain pleasure preparing for the play—a pleasure of conspiracy not unlike that enjoyed by parents decorating a tree on Christmas eve.

"Got something I want you to do," Square Deal told Sandy a few days later. "Come along with me."

Sandy was busy at the time cleaning the spittoons in the Lost Hope. He straightened up and looked humbly at Square Deal. "Can't very well leave my job right now," he said.

"We'll get a Mexican to take over," Square Deal growled. "Some of us—that is, we figure you got sort of a vacation coming."

Sandy's will-power had long ago been weakened by the blows fate had rained on him, and he allowed himself to be led away.

Square Deal took him first to Red Gordon's barber shop.

"Give Sandy the works," Square Deal told Red. "Haircut, shave—everything!"

Red fixed a professional eye on Sandy's hair and beard, shook his head solemnly. He looked at Square Deal and saw the gambler's sly wink.

"Sure—oh, sure," Red said spiritedly. "Get right in the chair, Sandy. Have you looking like the Duke of Wales in two shakes of a dog's tail."

Not for years had Sandy submitted to the ministrations of a barber. He had forgotten that cleanly feeling to be found in a good hair trim and a fresh shave. But it all came back to him with the sting of the lotion Red put on his face, and it brought the memory of the young buckaroo he had been in the days when he had courted Bryce's mother.

Tears were in his eyes when he at last got out of the chair. "Don't have the change with me right now," he told Red. "But I'll be in shortly—"

"Don't worry," Red answered. He gave Square Deal a sardonic grin. "All taken care of."

"You're wanted up the street now," Square Deal said.

He took Sandy's arm and firmly propelled him to Lew Cottrell's Prairie Emporium. Belle was waiting for them there.

"Going to fix you up with some new clothes," Belle said to Sandy. "A suit, hat, shoes, shirts. . . . What you got, Lew?"

The shadow of suspicion took form in Sandy's mind. "I ain't got no money for clothes," he mumbled.

Lew had started to lift a suit from the rack; now he paused and glanced at Sandy.

Belle looked at Square Deal.

"That's all right," Square Deal said, his voice the soft pur of a satisfied cat. "Lew here had a run of bad luck the other night and I'm collecting. What do you say—you take the clothes and pay me when you can? We can call it a loan if you want."

Sandy was bewildered; he felt something going on here that he didn't understand. His mind caught the flash of unspoken words telegraphed among the three, yet he was unable to register the meaning of those words. That small bit of pride still left to him came to life suddenly, but he smothered it when he looked at the clothes Lew took down and held toward him.

His fingers touched the broadcloth of the coat. "Nice, ain't it?" he muttered hungrily.

"Try it on—see if it fits," Belle snapped peremptorily. "Go on—don't stand there like a ninny!"

She defied resistance; and anyway, she had handled men too long to stand for any rebellion on the part of a bum like Sandy.

In a few minutes, then, the barroom swamper found himself possessed of the new outfit. Square Deal took him to his cabin where he could change; knotted the black string tie for him, and a faint grin worked the muscles of his usually bland face as he buckled the gun-belt about Sandy's waist and set the Stetson on his head.

Even yet Sandy could hardly believe he had shucked his old rags. An invisible rope seemed to bind him to his past, for a man doesn't step out of character in the twinkling of an eye, clothes or no clothes. He was conscious, though, of something stirring within him, and when he stood forth for Square Deal's final inspection, his shoulders were thrown back and a new glimmer shone in his watery eyes.

"Better go let Belle see," Sandy said

eagerly, like a child wanting to show his mother a new toy.

"Huh?" Square Deal grunted. "Oh, yeah. She'll have to wait, though. Marshal wants to see you first. Asked me to bring you around."

That was the height of the grim joke they were playing on old Sandy—the part taken by Matt Stevens.

The Marshal was in his office going over some paper work when Square Deal brought Sandy in. Matt swung around on his swivel chair, and he wore his famous poker face as he looked at Sandy.

"Sit down, boys," Matt said curtly.

An itching sensation pricked Sandy's neck.

The peace-officer delayed long enough to roll and light a cigarette. Then he fixed his gaze again on Sandy. "Been needing a long time to go to Denver," he said slowly. "Some business there. Couldn't get away till we found somebody we could appoint deputy to look after things while I was gone."

A wave of heat like that from an open furnace hit Sandy full in the face, and weakness poured through him. At first he thought his ears had not heard aright, but as the marshal continued talking he knew he had not misunderstood.

Matt looked at Square Deal as if an explanation were needed—either that, or his conscience had to be bolstered. "Things pretty quiet around here right now," he said. "Have been for some time. Oughtn't be no trouble—and I won't be gone more'n a couple of weeks."

The gambler considered the tips of his long fingers. "Reckon you got the town pretty well tamed by now, Matt," he said. He gave the sheriff an intent, significant glance. "And I guess *we* can take care of anybody who took a sudden notion to howl at the moon."

"How about it, Sandy?" Matt asked. "Like to have the job?"

A lump as big as a sour dough biscuit lodged in Sandy's throat, and he found it difficult to breathe. It was largely on that account he didn't perceive what they were doing.

But he wouldn't have refused even if he had!

For years he had found escape from his environment in the subsconcious world. Within the secrecy of his shack at night and in his dreams he had been a famous frontier lawman. In his imagination he was someone like Wyatt Earp, Bat Masterson, Billy Brooks—or Matt Stevens, here.

"I'll take it," he said finally. His voice seemed detached, but he knew it was his own, for the lump in his throat had disappeared. He added, swallowing, "Glad to do anything that'll help you."

The sheriff regarded him thoughtfully for a moment. He said: "You might as well be sworn in now. Stand up, Sandy. Raise your right hand."

When the few words were spoken that made Sandy a deputy marshal Matt waved him back to his chair.

"I'll be leaving early in the morning," Matt said. "Might be well for you to move into my quarters, Sandy—anybody wants the law they head there."

Sandy nodded silently, half afraid that he'd wake up and find himself back at the Lost Hope.

"Got a gun, huh?" Matt went on. "Here—I'll let you have my star, too. Don't have no deputy badges around right now."

Sandy took the star and fastened it to the front of his shirt; it was like a hot iron it pressed against his chest. For a couple of minutes he stared at it, so that he failed to see the look of understanding that passed between Matt and Square Deal.

"We'd better be going," Square Deal told Sandy then. "Belle'll be waiting for us. She wants us to have supper with her tonight."

THAT day Bryce Oakes was crossing Missouri on the stage coach on his way to Nevada to take that job in a mine.

And that evening as he made camp on the Cimarron, Frick Bradley went over in his mind just how he'd cut down Marshal Stevens of Tasajera in order to regain the doubtful glory of a badman.

He'd never seen the famous old peace officer, but then one doesn't have much difficulty finding a badge-toter. . . .

It would be an hour before the stage pulled in from the north.

Sandy sat in the shade of the porch before the county jail. For the third time in the last thirty minutes his arm stole unconsciously to polish the surface of his star with his coat sleeve.

Suddenly Square Deal Colby emerged from the shimmering heat waves and hurried to Sandy. For once the gambler's suave aplomb was gone. When he came up on the porch he pulled a handkerchief from a pocket and wiped the back of his neck.

"Got some news," Square Deal said. He paused until he had returned his handkerchief to his pocket. "Frick Bradley just pulled into town!"

That didn't mean anything to Sandy.

"I knew that bird down in Texas," Square Deal explained. "He's a bad hombre."

Sandy still showed no concern. He said: "Well?"

"There's liable to be trouble, with Frick in town. Look here, Sandy—better shed that star. We can get—"

"No!"

It was as explosive as the unexpected eruption of a volcano. The violence of it shook Sandy's frame, and he had to wait a bit before he could say more. "Matt appointed me his deputy, and I took the oath," he said finally. "I'm staying on the job—badman or no badman! I reckon it's my job."

The look he gave Square Deal began to waver. "My son's coming," he said, as if that were reason enough for his determination. "And anyway, we—we ain't certain-sure that this Frick Bradley's on the prowl, are we?"

Square Deal let him have it then, frankly, brutally—right between the eyes. "You poor old fool—you're blinder'n I thought. Suppose Matt would have appointed a worthless derelict like you for his deputy if I hadn't asked him to?"

The anger within Sandy turned his shaven, sunken cheeks a fiery red. He opened his mouth to speak, but the words refused to come.

"Can't you see what they're doing?" Square Deal continued, his words falling on Sandy's head like hammer blows. "The whole town's laughing—making a fool of you. Fixed you up fit to kill—going to pretend you're a great man—all because Belle wanted us to make a show for your son. . . . Take them clothes you got on. I paid for 'em—a hundred dollars, they cost me."

He lit a cigarette as he prepared his parting shot. "I'm telling you this for your own good, Sandy," he said slowly. "I know Frick Bradley's up to something—and you ain't the man to handle him."

The quiet then was so heavy that it pressed painfully against Sandy's eardrums and set up a roaring in his head. More and more his body slumped on his chair until it had taken on the shape of a sack of potatoes.

For a long time he gazed at the town. Now that Square Deal had explained things to him he saw what they had done to him. And it hurt!

In spite of his fine clothes and the star he wore they still thought of him as Sandy, the swamper!

At last he said: "There comes the stage. Reckon I'll go meet my boy."

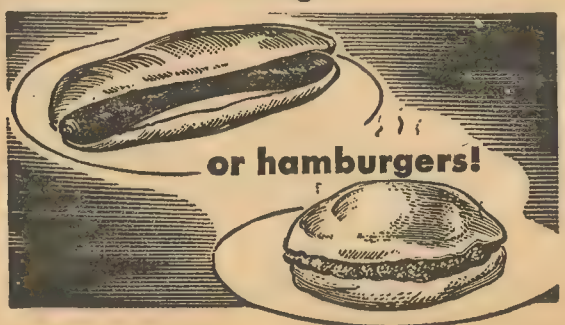
He rose to his feet and started up the street for the hotel where the stage would

NO FINER DRINK . . . with hot dogs . . .

PEPSI-COLA

REG. U.S. PAT. OFF.

Energy . . . in the big big bottle



stop. So preoccupied was he that he was hardly aware that Square Deal was keeping step with him.

A larger crowd than usual had gathered before the hotel. Red Gordon noticed him and cackled: "Hiyuh, marshal? Won't be long now!"

A bitter, hard lump grew in the region of Sandy's throat. Someone at his side clutched his arm. He looked up to see Belle.

He didn't recognize her at first. Gone was the paint from her face, and from God only knew where she had got together a modest costume. The brooch at her throat reminded him of Bryce's ma. "Why, Belle," he choked. "I—I—"

She gave him a kindly smile. He pierced behind that smile and saw that she was pretending, too; she couldn't have changed her character more than if it were her own son that was coming.

His hand closed over hers, and he drew courage from her. Slowly his stature straightened, his shoulders squared and light appeared again in his eyes.

Thus he stood, almost in a trance, while the stage came down the hill and the street and clattered to a stop.

The crowd pressed back, and Sandy found himself alone in the center of a small open space; even Belle had deserted him.

He watched the young man climb down from the stage—a well dressed young man with the bearing of a gentleman. He waited there, his heart pounding fearfully.

"Dad?"

Sandy felt the firm handclasp; then he was being smothered in Bryce's big, strong arms. "Stand back a minute, son," he said. "Let me take a look at you."

Sandy's jaw quivered. Tears flooded his eyes so that he couldn't see the delighted grins of the crowd about him.

"Been a long, long time, Dad," Bryce said. "But I knew I'd recognize you. I'd tell you by your star."

That tickled the crowd. They pressed forward, and the volume of noise about the Tower of Babel was no greater than that which rose about Sandy now.

Sandy was afraid, now that they'd had their joke, that someone would give him away. He grabbed the boy's arm. "Let's get out of here before these hoodlums tramp us plumb to death," he growled.

He extricated Bryce from the mob and took him to Matt Stevens' cabin. A good many years it had been since they had seen each other, and there was so little time for them to get acquainted again.

FRICK BRADLEY stood at the bar of the Lost Hope, sullenly drinking alone to get the strength of that unreasoning madness that would enable him to hunt out the law of this place and kill him.

Before long the town felt his presence, like an electric storm gathering on the horizon to sweep relentlessly across the land. No one knew exactly why he had come, but word was quickly passed along the street that a killer was in Tasajera.

Sandy stayed with his son at Matt Stevens' cabin. As the evening wore on he began to sense the tension that had come over the community, and so great was the dread that filled him he feared he would be unable to hold up until Bryce should leave.

Morning came at last, however, and the town remained in peace. Sandy began to take hope that nothing would happen until his son was gone. After that—well, maybe he'd better do as Square Deal suggested, and take off his badge!

But the clash he knew was impending came too soon for that. . . .

As he and Bryce walked towards the hotel where the boy would take the northbound stage, Frick Bradley lurched from a doorway to plant himself in their way.

Sandy had never seen the gunman before, but he recognized what he was up against. Fear congealed his muscles. He stopped, waited, and the fingers of his right hand curved into talons.

Bryce had been back in civilization too long to catch the drama being unfolded here on the dust-laden street. He came to a halt beside Sandy. "What—what's the matter?" he asked.

Bradley saw the opening offered him. "A pilgrim, eh?" he sneered. "Maybe he'd like to dance." He kept his eyes on Sandy as his hand moved slowly towards his gun, hesitated a few inches from its butt.

Sandy was scared, as paralyzed by sheer terror as a bird transfixed by the glare of a snake. But he mustn't let the boy see that. From the depths of his fear he pulled the thought of what Matt Stevens would do in a situation like this.

His left hand reached to push Bryce out of danger. "You're drunk," he shot at Bailey. "Get out of town—now!"

That was all Bradley wanted. "Let's see you try it!"

Bryce understood now what was taking place. "Why—" he snapped. His bag thumped on the board sidewalk, and it made just enough noise to distract Bradley from his advantage. Then the boy started a swing at Bradley.

Guns roared—two death-filled shots.

Sandy had long imagined a meeting like this, and through an endless succession of nights he had dreamed about it.

He had pictured himself as someone like Matt Stevens—facing an outlaw and loosing the voice of law and order from the throat of a Colt. So vivid had been those dreams that now the crisis had actually come, his action was largely reflex.

And yet, he couldn't believe it.

For the gunman's knees buckled and the man dropped to the sidewalk.

Sandy lifted his gaze to the crowd that was gathering. He saw Square Deal running down the street.

"Hurt, Sandy?" Square Deal asked.

Sandy fought hard to keep his muscles under control. He growled: "Better get this fellow out of sight before the stage comes."

He looked at his son, grinning enigmatically when he saw the pallor on the boy's face. "We'd better go, Bryce, or you'll be late."

He took the boy's arm. . . .

SANDY wasn't sure just what he ought to do that evening when he pushed through the bat-wing doors of the Lost Hope. Reaction had set in, and his thoughts were as mixed up and running away with him as a stampede of longhorns.

He halted just inside the door, and his gaze swept the saloon. At last his eyes focused on Square Deal who sat alone at his table the other side of the room. Heedless of the curious stares of the men at the bar he shuffled across to Square Deal.

"I—I guess—it's about time to—" he gulped.

The gambler interrupted him. "Sit down," he said gruffly.

Sandy let himself down on a chair, and watched Square Deal riffle a pack of cards. He saw, too, that Belle was again sitting at the piano.

Sandy tried to get a firm hold on himself, but when he spoke the whine of a beaten man crept into his voice. "Reckon I'll be getting back on my old job," he said.

Square Deal lifted an eyebrow and remained silent.

"These fine clothes now," Sandy continued, his shoulders drooping more and more. "You said they cost you a hundred dollars. Take me a long time to pay for 'em, and if—"

"I'm a gambler," Square Deal said abruptly. "What do you say to cutting for 'em—high card wins. Double or nothing."

He pushed the deck towards Sandy. Sandy turned over a card. The ten of clubs.

Square Deal's face wore his professional look when he split the remainder of the deck and glanced at the bottom card.

He kept the card hidden in the palm of his hand. "You know," he said quietly, "that stage driver brought word to town that the bridge over Washita Canyon went down while Matt Stevens was crossing it. Looks like—being as Matt appointed you deputy—you'll have to stay on as the Law here for a while."

He looked again at the card in his hand, slapped it face down and raked the scattered deck towards him. "You win," he grunted.

Sandy's shoulders shook off their droop. He stood up, made his way from the saloon to go to the office down at the jail.

When he was gone Belle whirled on the piano stool and began to thump out a tune. She couldn't sing, though—not yet. . . .

She had caught a glimpse of the card Square Deal had pulled from the pack.

It was the king of diamonds.

NEW HANDS FOR SHANGHAI KELLY

By WALT COBURN

Back in the cattle-country, old-timers still tell of that red-headed fighting trail boss, Shanghai Kelly, who'd poker his trail-hands out of their wages, buy them a barrel of whiskey to console them—and then, with his big shoulders against the wall, would roar his battle-cry to any dozen punchers who thought they were tough enough to win back their cows and cash with battering fists!

CHAPTER ONE

Hell Starts At Tascosa

SHANGHAI KELLY got his long, powerful legs braced and his back against the wall so that no man could get at him from behind. The heavy barroom chair gripped in his hamlike hands had mowed a clear trail through the crowd. Now with the wreckage of

Hard-Hitting Novelette of the Thundering Cattle Trail

"Load my gun, button," said Ike Smith.

the chair swinging like a flail, with half a dozen men crawling back to safety with cracked heads and battered faces, the bellowing roar of the tough trail boss carried its warning to all Tascosa.

"Come an' git it, ye white-livered sons of gutless snakes! Come on, all ye lily-livered would-be tough hands and git a taste o' Shanghai Kelly's soothin' syrup! I'll rock ye to sleep! Gang up on ol' Shanghai Kelly, would ye? I'll knock ye down faster than ten men kin pick ye up! Ye Tascosa barflies! Ye drink-beggin' scuts!"

And when those behind crowded the front ranks into battle, the big trail boss knocked them down. Those who did not lie on the blood-spattered floor were crawling away on their hands and knees.

Suddenly a half-filled whiskey bottle whistled through the air and caught Shanghai Kelly between the eyes. He went down slowly, shaking his shaggy red head, a dazed look spreading on his blunt-featured face, still gripping the smashed chair. Even then the gang of town toughs and drunken cowhands were holding back, afraid to close in.

Dimly then, Shanghai Kelly heard the heavy roar of a gun and saw the cowpuncher with a smoking six-shooter in his hand. He heard the man's voice and saw that tough, trouble-making cowhand called Red River Smith go down under the sudden blast.

"Stand your hands!" the black-mustached cowpuncher's voice cut through the gun-echoes. "I'm playin' for keeps. Back away from Shanghai Kelly an' stand hitched!"

By bracing his back and shoulders against the wall, Kelly managed to keep his feet until strength came back into his legs.

He pawed the sweat and blood and spilled whiskey out of his eyes and grinned mirthlessly into the hard black eyes of his tall rescuer.

"I have ye to thank, mister, fer savin' me from a beatin'. But guns was barred. Ye shouldn't have killed Red River Smith, even if he was the underhanded scut that fetched on the mutiny. 'Twas Red River that heaved the bottle, but it was my fault I was too lazy to duck. I doubt if they'd ha' killed me. I mighta lost my trail herd, but I'd have got it back and whipped my crew into shape. . . . But whiskey won't fetch Red River Smith back from Hell. And he was a top cowhand—and in debt to me for two months wages to boot!"

The tall stranger's thin lips twisted in a sardonic grin. "I'll work out Red River Smith's debt," he said flatly.

Shanghai Kelly weaved his way to the bar. The saloon man came up from behind his bar where he had crouched for safety.

"Belly up to the bar," Shanghai told the men who had ganged up on him, "Fightin' gives a man a thirst."

His bloodshot green eyes were no longer glazed. He stared hard at the tall lean man who still held his six-shooter.

"Ye won't need your shootin' iron, mister. There ain't a man in the house would take up the fight for Red River. And I'll let ye work out Red River's debt. I'm short-handed, what does a man call ye now?"

"Clabe Barlow." The man ejected two empty shells from his six-shooter, then replaced them with two fresh cartridges.

Shanghai Kelly's hard green eyes missed nothing. He saw the gun still gripped in the hand of the dead Red River Smith, and the fresh bullet rip in Clabe Barlow's dusty, sweat-marked hat. Red River had almost taken Barlow with him into Eternity. And if, as the big, red-headed trail boss now reasoned, those two men had been shooting out some personal grudge, then that gave the killing another angle.

"I've got about eight hundred cattle," said Clabe Barlow, "ready to go up the trail. I got 'em in my own road iron. I've bin holdin' 'em on feed and water, waitin' for your outfit to show up. I'd be proud to throw in with your trail herd."

SHANGHAI KELLY poured himself a big drink. Few cowmen ever voluntarily threw in with his outfit. His reputation was a tough one. He carried a keg of whiskey in the mess wagon. He banked a poker game along the trail that was said to keep his cowhands in constant debt to him. Men who had thrown in with him, cowmen with a few hundred head of cattle like this Clabe Barlow, often were pokered out of their steers.

On the other hand, this same big, hard fisted trail boss was said to be one man who got to the far end of the trail without losing any of the cattle in his road iron. And even the renegades and rustlers who lay in wait along the cattle trails had learned by bitter lessons to leave Shanghai Kelly's trail herds alone.

"Not many men," the big trail boss said slowly, "want to pool their cattle with Shanghai Kelly's trail herds."

"These eight hundred head of steers," said Clabe Barlow, "is all I've got to lose. I aim to git 'em delivered. I've bin told that Shanghai Kelly don't spill ary cattle along the trail."

"My outfit's camped a few miles from here on the Canadian River," said Shanghai Kelly. "We'll be movin' off the bedground about daybreak. If you kin move your dogies so's not to hold my outfit back."

"I'll drift 'em into your herd by sunrise," Clabe Barlow told him. He lifted his glass of whiskey and they drank.

Clabe Barlow gave the saloonman some money and told him to give the dead Red River Smith a decent planting at the boothill. He asked Shanghai Kelly if he needed any more help handling the gang who had tried to hamstring him.

The big red-headed trail boss sized up those men in the saloon who were lined up at the bar. His bloodshot eyes were as hard as green bottle glass. Some of them were battered and blood-spattered. Others who had taken no part in the free for all were unmarked.

"How about it, boys?" Shanghai Kelly's flat-lipped grin challenged them.

"We got a-plenty if you're satisfied, Shang," grinned a man who was nursing a smashed nose. "No hard feelin's. You was spoilin' for a fight. Said you'd mark off what we owed you if we could whup yuh. It wasn't our idee. Red River Smith kinda ribbed it. Then he hung back."

"That's right," admitted Shanghai Kelly solemnly. "Whiskey talk makes a loud noise. That Red River had his sights raised."

There was no way of telling just how those tough cowhands were going to take to Clabe Barlow. The tall lean gunslinger had sort of horned into a private fight. But on the other hand, if Clabe Barlow and Red River Smith had shot out an old feud, that was all right.

Also, if Red River Smith had left a friend or two behind to take up his fight later when the sign was right, that made no difference at all to Shanghai Kelly. Just as long as their shooting did not bother his cattle or the remuda of horses and mules.

Shanghai Kelly told Clabe Barlow that it looked like his outfit was all one big happy family again. That if Barlow had cattle to move, there was no need for him hanging around town.

Clabe Barlow bought a round of drinks, then he rode alone out of Tascosa. When he had gone, they buried Red River Smith.

Before he and his men pulled out for camp, Shanghai Kelly made a few inquiries around Tascosa concerning Clabe Barlow. But nobody seemed to know anything about the man who had killed Red River Smith. However, Tascosa gave shelter to some mighty hard renegades and told no tales. A man who talks when he should be listening is apt to run into trouble.

Tascosa had known Red River Smith. But nobody was making any talk about the dead man. They withheld judgment of both living and dead.

Shanghai Kelly was not given to worry. He took things pretty much in his own big stride, fought in the open, backed down for no man, and gloried in the tough reputation he had built up.

Trail towns like Tascosa had given him the nickname Shanghai from the habit he had of getting his trail crews from different saloonmen and tinhorn gamblers.

Some cowhand would hit town and get on a drunk. The saloonman or tinhorn would let that cowpuncher get fairly deeply in debt about the time Kelly was due to come along with a trail herd. Kelly would pay the saloonkeeper or gambler the amount owed by the cowpuncher. Then he'd hire on the man, who would be in debt to him.

When the cowpuncher sobered up, he'd find himself hired out, or sold out, to Shanghai Kelly.

It was much the same method used by the skippers of sailing ships to get a crew. Kelly shanghaied cowhands like the captains of sailing ships got sailors.

Shanghai Kelly had sized up the quick-triggered Clabe Barlow as best he could. And he prided himself on being a mighty good judge of men.

Clabe Barlow had, to a certain extent, proved his toughness. He had swapped shots with Red River Smith as coldly as if he'd shot a beef. And he had been ready to play his hand out if Red River's friends had wanted to pick up the dead man's cards. Clabe Barlow was a tough customer. And he had eight hundred head of steers in his own road iron. . . .

THE trail north to Cheyenne was a long one. More than one trail boss had lost his herd before he got to the point of delivery. Little bunches of cattle rustlers preyed upon the smaller trail herds like so many prairie wolves, waiting for one of those stormy black

nights when the sign would be right for a swift, gun-spitting raid.

Clabe Barlow talked and acted like a Texan. But Shanghai Kelly had taken cattle drives up every trail out of Texas and this was the first time, he was certain, he had ever laid eyes on the tall lean man. Clabe Barlow could be one of those renegades out of No Man's Land. He could throw in with Shanghai Kelly, planning to steal the fourteen hundred head of cattle in Shanghai Kelly's S road iron.

For that, figured Kelly, must have been Red River Smith's game. Kelly would gamble that Red River had ribbed those cowpunchers into a frame of mind where they were ready to turn on the big trail boss, beat him to death or shoot him. Then take the drive on up the trail, sell the herd and split the proceeds.

Shanghai Kelly had been onto it. And it was typical of the big, red-headed trail boss that he had given Red River Smith and the trail mutineers, a fighting chance to get what they wanted.

But Kelly was keeping that knowledge to himself. During the free for-all-ruckus he, himself, had started, just to force Red River Smith's hand, Shanghai Kelly had easily spotted those of his crew who were really after his scalp. As well as those others who had taken his whiskey challenge as rough and tumble sport, with no hard feelings, win, lose or draw.

Shanghai Kelly had spotted those cowhands who were really dangerous. But he was not firing them because they were good cowhands and good cowpunchers were hard to get. Besides, they were in debt to him. And now, just in case this stranger Clabe Barlow might have in mind the same sort of rustling game he had beaten Red River Smith out of, Kelly knew which of his cowpunchers would sell out to Barlow. And which cowhands would remain loyal in a tight to Shanghai Kelly.

The big trail boss pulled the cork on a bottle and passed it among his men as they rode back to camp in the starlight. Now they would relieve the men whom Kelly had left on guard and let them go to town for a few hours.

The night was clear and cool. The cattle watered and grazed onto the bedground. The nighthawk, a slim young Texan called Cotton Eye, would have no excuse for spilling a horse or mule. Especially since Shanghai had put an extra guard on with the young Texan. For it was one of those nights when one man could hold the herd and sleep in his saddle as he sang to 'em. The trail boss was taking no chances on losing anything to the night riding renegades who ride in and out of Tascosa.

But as they neared camp and spotted the bedded trail herd, Shanghai Kelly grew uneasy. Something was wrong. He could not hear the sound of horse bells.

If he had been fighting drunk in town, the big trail boss was cold sober now. A trail outfit without a remuda is afoot.

Cotton Eye was not at camp. Neither was the cowpuncher called Lefty who had been put on horse guard with him.

Out at the herd the cowpunchers on guard said they had not seen or heard anything of the remuda.

"You boys stay on guard. The rest of us is huntin' horses."

They sighted a horse wearing a saddle —Cotton Eye's horse. Then they found the young nighthawk stretched out on the ground. His hat was off and his straw colored hair was dark and sticky with blood. But he was not dead.

It took quite a while to bring the gun-whipped young nighthawk back to consciousness. "Last thing I recollect," he told Shanghai Kelly, "was Lefty handin' me a pint bottle he'd pulled the cork outa. Then somethin' hit me. It musta bin Lefty."

Lefty had been one of the cowpunchers who had thrown in strong with Red River Smith.

Shanghai Kelly scattered his men on a wide circle and told them to ride in pairs. To kill Lefty where they found him, and to fetch back that remuda.

Then he rode off alone, cussing himself for a boneheaded fool. Swinging in a wide circle, not daring to get too far away from the bedded cattle, he finally drifted back to the bedded herd on his leg-weary horse to wait for daybreak. He gave the cowpunchers on guard what was left in his town bottle, grinned flatly at them, sang ribald songs to the bedded herd, and promised the stars that when he cut the sign of that gent Lefty, he'd

kill him like he'd kill a hydrophobia skunk.

It was breaking dawn when Shanghai Kelly heard the faint tinkle of horse bells. He rode out from the bedded herd and towards the bell sounds.

But it was not his men who were fetching back the S remuda, nor was it Lefty. Two men were drifting the bunched remuda towards camp. One of them rode out to meet Shanghai Kelly.

It was Clabe Barlow, his white teeth bared in a grin. "Some gent with a little horse larceny in his system was driftin' your remuda yonderly," said Clabe Barlow. "My boys stopped him. He's talkin' it over in Hell by now with Red River Smith."

CHAPTER TWO

'Way for a Trail Boss!

BETWEEN the first break of dawn and sunrise Clabe Barlow and two cowpunchers who savvied their work had drifted eight hundred head of two-year-old steers off last night's bedground and strung them out to throw in with Shanghai Kelly's trail herd.

It was when Shanghai Kelly saw their road brand that he told Clabe Barlow they'd tally his eight hundred head before he threw in with the trail herd outfit. Because Clabe Barlow's road brand was a Figure 8 on the left thigh. Shanghai Kelly's road brand was an S on the left thigh. Changing the S into an 8 was a simple enough job with a hot running iron.

"We'll tally your dogies into the trail herd, mister," said the big red haired trail boss, "just to keep the books straight."

So in the early morning Shanghai Kelly and Clabe Barlow tallied exactly eight hundred head of steers in the Figure 8 road iron into the moving trail herd that wore Shanghai Kelly's S road iron.

Shanghai Kelly had a tally and brand book and into it went the list of nearly a dozen brands that he copied from the brands on the hides of the eight hundred head of steers.

In his S road iron were cattle of more than a dozen brands. Neither man commented on those mixed brands. No questions were asked how and why and when those cattle in a dozen different irons had been acquired.

But when the cattle had been tallied into the trail herd and the job done so neatly that the progress of the long strung-out trail herd had not been bothered, the big trail boss asked Clabe Barlow how many men and horses he figured on taking along.

"Two men," said Clabe Barlow, "and myself. We throwed our strings of horses into your remuda when we picked it up. Yonder's my two men, ridin' back along the swing."

"That third feller that's bin kinda tallyin' along with us. Who's he, Barlow?"

"Ain't he one of your cowhands?"

Shanghai Kelly scowled and shook his head. They both watched the man on the big blue roan horse as he rode along the strung out cattle towards the point of the herd where the trail boss and Clabe Barlow were riding slowly.

Both men were sharing the same uneasy suspicion. The Cattle Raisers' Association had been bringing a lot of pressure to bear lately. That association extended from Texas to Montana, had begun to organize, and it had headquarters at Fort Worth, Denver, Cheyenne and Helena, Montana. Letters had been written back and forth, officers elected, the brands and earmarks of cattle companies and individual owners belonging to the Association were registered. And the Association had begun to get the co-operation of law officers along the cattle trails.

Notice was being sent out to all trail drovers that their trail herds would be inspected by law officers empowered to hold up and inspect trail herds. Thus, the Association was beginning to make it tough going for the rustlers. These cattle inspectors could cut back any and all strays not in the road brand of the owner of a trail herd.

That man on the big blue roan horse had shown up out of the dawn from nowhere, had gotten a tally on Clabe Barlow's cattle, then had ridden up along the strung out trail herd from the drags and along the swing to the point of the moving cattle.

Shanghai Kelly and Clabe Barlow looking at one another. The big red-haired Shanghai grinned flatly. Clabe Barlow's

thin-lipped mouth twisted sideways under his drooping black mustache. Then their eyes hardened and they watched the approach of the man on the big blue roan.

He was a small, wiry man who sat his saddle like he'd been born and raised there. His face was leathery and his hair and mustache were gray. His puckered, pale-gray eyes were set under shaggy gray brows. He grinned faintly at Shanghai Kelly and Clabe Barlow.

"I reckon," he said quietly, looking straight at the big red-headed trail boss, "you're Shanghai Kelly. I just come from Tascosa. I'm kinda reppin' for the stray irons in your trail herd."

"I own everything in my road iron, Little Feller," said Shanghai Kelly.

"Mebby," nodded the little man. "On the other hand, mebby not. There's them five hundred head of steers that Red River Smith throwed into your herd. . . . I was told at Tascosa that Red River Smith had bin killed."

Shanghai Kelly's grin was wide but his green eyes were hard and cold. "Red River Smith lost them five hundred head of cattle to me playin' poker. He was a good cowhand but a sorry poker player. He dropped his cattle tryin' to fill inside flushes."

"They wasn't his cattle to drop," said the little man, biting off each word. "They was strays. Like a good percentage of them eight hundred head that Clabe Barlow has in his Figger 8 road iron is strays. I bin kinda tallyin' 'em as they was throwed into the trail herd. . . . I'll just mosey on up the trail with your outfit as far as Cheyenne. I kin use Red River Smith's bed an' ride his string of horses."

"Red River Smith's droppin' behind," said Shanghai Kelly, "didn't leave me short handed. Now that you've looked the outfit over, Little Feller, why don't you just head on back to Tascosa?"

The leathery little cowpuncher shook his head. "I'm representin' the owners of them stray brands. I'm going on up the trail with your outfit. Mebbyso I don't like your company or the company of Clabe Barlow any better than you like mine. But I'm goin' along, regardless."

"And I'm ramroddin' this trail outfit," said Shanghai Kelly evenly. "I hire 'em and fire 'em. Now if you'll just ride on back to Tascosa there won't be no ruckus. . . ."

"You won't have much left of an outfit to ramrod, Big Mister, when the Inspector stops this trail herd at the next town up the trail, at Middle Water. He'll cut back the strays I'm reppin' for. He won't pay much attention to your S road iron. Or to Clabe Barlow's Figger 8 road iron. You ain't makin' it easy on yourself, Big Mister, by lettin' me ride back to Tascosa."

"Are you tryin' to tell a man," said Shanghai Kelly, "that you kin pass this trail herd along to Cheyenne without it bein' held up and cut fer strays?"

THE leathery little man on the blue roan grinned faintly. "A man that plays as much poker as you do should be able to figger when the other feller's holdin' the aces. When it's time for you to check the bettin' his direction."

"Are you an Inspector for the Association," Clabe Barlow spoke for the first time, "or are you playin' a game?"

The little man's eyes were as bright and cold as whetted steel; his voice brittle. "I'm reppin' for the stray brands in this trail herd. You try on that gun play you're figgerin' and mebbyso you'll find out I ain't as easy to kill as Red River Smith. Now fill your hand with a gun or dry up."

There was a long barreled six-shooter in the little man's hand. It had gotten there so quickly that it seemed like some conjurer's trick.

Clabe Barlow's hand came slowly away from his gun. His opaque black eyes glittered in the sunrise.

Shanghai Kelly grinned widely, but behind that grin was a shrewd and quick working brain. This was all to his liking. It would do no harm to have in his outfit a man who was not in cahoots with this Clabe Barlow who used a Figure 8 road iron. And like the little man on the blue roan had said, a poker player should know when to lay down his hand or check the bet to a man who seemed to hold aces.

"Tuck in your shirt tails," he chuckled. "Shootin' gits a herd spooky, so save your

fightin' till we git to town. Put up your iron, Little Feller. You're hired. What's your name?"

"Smith," said the grizzled little cowhand. "Ike Smith. From Nacona, on the Texas side of Red River."

His gun was still in his hand, its long barrel pointed straight at Clabe Barlow's belly. His eyes as hard and bright as its blued steel.

This might be, Shanghai Kelly told himself, the time and place to ask the little old cowhand what kin he was, if any, to the Red River Smith who had filled the newest grave at the Tascosa boothill. But it was up to Clabe Barlow to ask that question. Unless the lean, dark-complexioned Clabe already knew the answer.

Clabe Barlow's hands rested loosely on his saddle horn. There was no sign of fear on his lean hard face. No flinching in his opaque black eyes.

Ike Smith shoved his wooden-handled six-shooter back into its shabby old holster. The movement was slow and deliberate. He was grinning faintly when he looked at Shanghai Kelly.

"I got a little business to tend to," he said, "back at Tascosa. I'll overtake your outfit when you camp tonight."

Ike Smith reined his big blue roan horse and rode off without even looking back across his shoulder.

Clabe Barlow scowled after him until he had ridden out of sight. Shanghai Kelly said something about getting back up on the point and rode off, whistling tunelessly through his teeth. He looked back over his shoulder and saw Clabe Barlow riding back along the swing to where his two cowpunchers were riding.

Shanghai Kelly eyed the Figure 8 steers with a calculating and covetous look. He told himself that Clabe Barlow had trimmed and graded plenty of cattle to get those eight hundred head of two year old steers. He wondered what kind of a poker game Barlow played. Then he wondered if Ike Smith played poker, and his grin was hard and twisted.

Shanghai Kelly hated to worry about anything. Worry aged a man and took a lot of fun out of life and got a man nowhere. But there came times when it was wise to do a little worrisome thinking. And as he rode along the strung-out trail herd, pulling his silk neck scarf up across his mouth and nostrils to screen the dust that was kicked up by the shuffling cloven hoofs of the cattle, he tried to sort out in his mind all the things that there were to worry out to his own advantage.

There were those stray brands in his herd. Some of those cattle he had bought for real cash money from their owners. Little outfits. A hundred or two hundred head at a time. Cutting the steers out and paying a fair price.

There were steers in other brands that he had gotten with a bottle of forty rod whiskey and a deck of cards. An all night poker game at some cow ranch. They'd used cartridges instead of poker chips, and each cartridge representing a steer or its price. Card for card, hand for hand. No crooked work in those straight cut-throat poker games. Then Kelly would sober up the next day as he sweated cutting out the cattle he had won.

Take those five hundred head of steers he had let Red River Smith throw into his trail herd, even as this morning Clabe Barlow had thrown in his steers in their Figure 8 road iron. . . .

As the herd moved up the trail out of Texas, there were the nights when he had sucked Red River Smith into a little poker game. And each of those little sessions had cost Red River Smith another fifty or sixty head of steers, until Red River Smith had gambled away the five hundred head. It was all marked down in Shang-

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hai Kelly's little tally book. Red River's losings and occasional winnings, then more losings, from night to night as the herd moved on up the trail.

Shanghai Kelly bragged that he was no cattle thief. He shanghaied cowpunchers and he pokered men out of their cattle. But he paid top wages and fed his men good, and there was a keg of whiskey in the mess wagon for those who had sense enough not to abuse their whiskey privilege. He whipped the hell out of any man who got drunk at camp and put him on the Injun list till that man decided he could handle his whiskey.

His poker deck was never marked. If the man or men playing poker with Shanghai Kelly got a little too drunk to play a good winning game, that was their hard luck and no cheating on the part of Shanghai Kelly when he held his whiskey without letting it befuddle his poker savvy.

It was all written down there in Shanghia Kelly's little tally book and he'd show it to that little old Ike Smith or any damned cattle inspector between Fort Worth and Cheyenne. If that didn't prove his ownership to every head of cattle he claimed in those stray irons, if those Association law officers couldn't take his word, then, by the hell, he'd beat the truth into 'em with his two fists!

"I got nothin' to fear," he summed up that load of worry; "from ary inspectors." And tossed aside the worry burden like he'd throw away an empty whiskey bottle.

Then Shanghai Kelly took on the next bothersome worry—Clabe Barlow. It was damned queer that Barlow would have his steers gathered and shaped and in that Figure 8 road iron. That Figure 8 was too close to Shanghai Kelly's S to be just happenstance. Shaighai's trail herd had been short just about eight hundred head to bring it up to the right size to take north. He had run short of cash money, and poker-playing cowmen had gotten scarce and the days and weeks were passing fast and so he'd had to start up the trail with what he called a bob-tailed herd. And it was damned queer that a man should be ready and waiting there at Tascosa with just that many cattle and those cattle in a road iron too much like Shanghai Kelly's S to be funny.

From where Shanghai Kelly sat his horse, it looked like this Clabe Barlow had something wolfish in mind when he wandered into that saloon at Tascosa just in time to kill Red River Smith and lend Shanghai Kelly a hand in a tight.

So Clabe Barlow was a black wolf. And Shanghai Kelly was just the man to kill and scalp that black wolf if that was the way it had to be. And so Shanghai Kelly tossed away that bothersome worry. Another empty bottle thrown away.

Then about that little old cowhand that called himself Ike Smith. Ornery little old cuss. Said his piece and told a man to take it or leave it. Roostering up to a man five times his size and telling him he was repping for a bunch of two-bit stray irons. Mebbyso with a law badge pinned to his undershirt to back his play. Telling it scarey. But running no whizzer he wasn't plenty ready to back up with fight. The way that little old cuss had guessed that Clabe Barlow was about to jerk a gun and shoot him as he'd shot Red River Smith back yonder as Tascosa. And beating that quick triggered Injun Territory looking Barlow to the gun-play. There it was in his skinny old claw and pointed at Barlow's briskit. He sure knew how to talk turkey.

"Ike Smith. From Nacona on the Texas side of Red River."

Just that and nothing more. No trimmings. Let a man guess if he might be kin to Red River Smith. That was actually telling it. Spunky little old rooster with his fighting feathers ruffled and his steel spurs ready to rip and claw.

Ike Smith. Lawman or renegade, kin or stranger to the dead Red River Smith —it made no difference to Shanghai Kelly. But it might—and like as not would —play hell with the cattle rustling notions and careful plans of Clabe Barlow.

Shanghai Kelly pulled a bottle from the pocket of his old bullhide chaps. There was about four inches of whiskey left in it. He pulled the cork with his teeth and spat it out. Then he tilted the bottle and drained it to the last drop. As he heaved the bottle away, he sent with it his worry concerning little old Ike Smith, rep for the stray brands.

That was Shanghai Kelly.

CHAPTER THREE

Up From Texas!

IT WAS, Shanghai Kelly told himself, just about the damndest outfit he'd ever taken up a cattle trail; and he'd taken some queer 'uns. But this crew of cowhands had the world cheated for orneriness.

It had begun with that open mutiny at Tascosa when Red River Smith had ribbed 'em into turning on the trail boss like a snarling wolf pack turning on their leader. And now there was no doubt in Shanghai's mind but what they meant to kill him. And things getting tighter as the outfit moved up the trail.

The two men Clabe Barlow had fetched along with him were tough. Not loud, big-mouthed, or spur-jingling tough. But the quiet, stand-offish and hard-eyed kind. They took Shanghai Kelly's orders without a word of back talk or a sullen look, but they always managed to catch Clabe Barlow's eye to get his opinion, his almost imperceptible nod of approval. And they never let Barlow out of their sight, never beyond gun-range of that lean, Injun-looking owner of the Figure 8 road iron. And Shanghai had sense enough not to try to split them up. That would only start trouble.

Even as Red River Smith had worked it, so now did Clabe Barlow, in his own quiet way, begin to hire those same mutinous cowpunchers away from Shanghai Kelly. And the big whiskey-drinking, easy-going, tough trail boss was willing to gamble folding money against goober peas that those men had known Clabe Barlow before that quick-triggered hombre had shown up so suddenly and at just the right time to kill Red River Smith at Tascosa.

It didn't take a Philadelphia lawyer to figure out where Clabe Barlow and those cowhands came from. Their talk around the whiskey keg and camp fire had dropped little careless bits that told the tale. They were from Oklahoma and the Cherokee Strip they called the Nation —that outlaw-infested cow-country known as No Man's Land. They had been hired by Red River Smith and Clabe Barlow. Planted at the little cow towns where it was known that Shanghai Kelly was wont to pick up his trail crews. Then Red River Smith and Clabe Barlow had had a falling-out.

"Red River," grinned a half tipsy cowhand, "figgered Clabe Barlow was dead. Musta thought he was seein' a ghost. Spoilt Red River's aim. Clabe didn't shoot to miss."

Clabe Barlow was walking with a limp. He wore a wide bandage around his belly that he changed every night, washing out the soiled one and changing to another he had cleaned the night before. He carried a big tin box of strong carbolic salve that he rubbed into the nearly healed bullet wounds that scarred his ribs and there was the freshly healed bullet hole high on his thigh that he massaged to limber the stiffness out of his leg.

"Red River Smith dry-gulched Clabe," admitted a cowpuncher. "Left him for dead. Clabe was too tough to die."

Lefty, who had followed Red River Smith's orders to knock Cotton Eye in the head and set the outfit afoot until Red River had established himself as trail boss, had helped Red River Smith bushwhack Clabe. And when Lefty had shown up at the hideout pasture with his stolen remuda, Clabe Barlow had been waiting to give Lefty the proper kind of greeting.

"The left-handed bushwhackin' son bawled an' begged," one of Clabe Barlow's two tough cowhands told one of Shanghai Kelly's cowboys. "When he was done a-crawlin', Clabe up an' shot Lefty. Clabe's a quarter breed Cherokee. Just enough Injun in him to make him cold-blooded."

Young Cotton Eye overheard the talk and passed it on to Shanghai. The tow-headed young nighthawk was loyal to the big carrot-topped trail boss.

"Don't never put Clabe Barlow or his two tough hands on horse guard with me, Shang," he said. "If you figger I need help to hold that cavvy together, gimme Ike Smith."

Little old Ike Smith and Cotton Eye had struck up one of those cowcamp pardnerships that stands the test of hell and high water.

A lot of that tough whiskey-talk around the camp of an evening was meant for Ike Smith. But that little old cowhand let it slide like water off a new saddle slicker.

And at the same time he never gave Clabe Barlow or his two tough cowhands a chance at his back.

"Come a ruckus," he told Clabe Barlow, "I'll live long enough to kill you."

And with that curt warning, voiced in Shanghai Kelly's presence and within easy earshot of the others who squatted around the campfire, Ike Smith declared himself and dropped the subject.

After that they simmered down on their tough talk. They let Ike Smith strictly alone.

Shanghai Kelly had just grinned at their fight talk and hoorawed them.

"You fightin' hombres," he told them, "will scare yourselves plumb to death. That little ruckus back at Tascosa never got finished. I'll give you all a re-ride one of these nights when we hit another town. If you was half as tough as your slack-jawed talk, you'd be robbin' banks and trains instead of workin' out likker debts for forty a month. Your wolf howl sounds like coyote yappin' to ol' Shanghai Kelly."

But Shanghai wasn't turning his back on them. And it warmed his heart the way little old Ike Smith stuck by him. Night and day—without saying a word about it or waiting for orders.

There were two cattle inspectors waiting for them at Middle Water. Ike Smith rode out with Shanghai Kelly to meet them when they showed up to check the herd.

"Pass us along, boys," said Ike Smith. "Here's the credentials."

He showed them a legal looking paper that bore the official seal of Texas, and backed it up with a law badge he took from his pocket.

The two cattle inspectors rode on back to Middle Water, and the trail herd moved on.

"No need," said Ike Smith, "tellin' Clabe Barlow that I got this paper. That I got a law badge in my pocket."

AT PERICO, farther on up the trail, the herd was again stopped by cattle inspectors. This time Ike Smith called Shanghai Kelly off to one side before they talked to the inspectors.

"Now's your last chance to git shut of Clabe Barlow and his two tough gunhands and them shanghaied cowhands that's fixin' to hamstring you, mister. Say the word and them Figger 8 steers gits cut back. You kin hire a full crew of cowpunchers at Perico. Your last chance while we're still in Texas where I got authority. We cross a narrow strip of Oklahoma the yonder side of Perico. And there on the North Fork of the Canadian is Oklahoma, where Clabe Barlow comes from. That's where he'll make his play to take over this trail herd. Them cattle inspectors has a fightin' crew at Perico to back their play when they make a Winchester cut on ary trail herd. It's your last chance, Big Mister."

"Them shanghaied cowhands ain't worked out their debts to me," grinned Shanghai Kelly. "I never called on the law yet to fight my troubles out. Too old and sot in my ornery ways to change. I'm obliged, Little Feller."

So the trail herd was passed without inspection at Perico. And they moved on towards the Oklahoma Line.

Shanghai Kelly half expected Ike Smith either to have the herd cut for strays, regardless, or that the little old cowpuncher would quit the outfit there at Perico. But Ike Smith did neither.

Most of the outfit rode into Perico to paint the town. Shanghai Kelly told them to show up at camp for breakfast, or not at all. The herd was moving on.

The big trail boss stayed at camp. So did Ike Smith. Also Clabe Barlow and his two tough cowhands. Cotton Eye held his remuda near the bedded trail herd that night and kept his horses fairly close-bunched.

Shanghai Kelly stood all night guard. Ike Smith rode round and round the bedded herd with the big red-headed trail boss. They packed saddle guns.

Riding around the cattle in the opposite direction were Clabe Barlow and his two men. Whenever the riders met they tensed in their saddles until they'd passed and gone on around to the next meeting.

The cowpunchers who had ridden to Perico to paint the town were all back at camp before the end of last guard. Most of them were fairly sober and none of them loud. There had been too much

Law at Perico, they said, to keep them from letting their spurs out to the town-hole to drag and jingle. But Shanghai Kelly had a notion that Clabe Barlow had given them orders to stay sober and get back to camp for breakfast.

When the outfit got moving, Shanghai Kelly went to town with the cook to load the chuck wagon with grub and get a fresh keg of whiskey. Ike Smith went along. While Shanghai was loading the chuck wagon, Ike Smith disappeared for an hour or so. When the cook had pulled out with the loaded chuck wagon, Shanghai and Ike Smith went into a saloon to have a drink.

"Clabe Barlow," said Ike Smith as they leaned against the bar with their drinks, "aims to take over the outfit at the North Fork of the Canadian, in Oklahoma. Then he'll crowd the herd on to Carrizo Springs in Colorado and on up the trail to Las Animas. He's got cattle buyers waitin' there to take delivery on the trail herd. They'll counter-brand everything there and split the proceeds. Drift back to No Man's Land. You still got a last chance, Big Mister, to save your taw."

Shanghai Kelly grinned wide and shook his shaggy red head. His eyes were as green as bottle glass.

"I'd ruther be left dead on the banks of the North Fork, Little Feller, than to holler for the Law. No man kin call Shanghai Kelly a quitter. . . . But there's no need fer you to string along."

"I'm reppin' fer them stray irons, Big Mister."

They rode out of town together, and out of Texas. Together they pointed the long trail herd into Oklahoma.

CHAPTER FOUR

Shanghai Showdown

THERE was a bad storm coming. It had been hot and sultry all day and they had to dry camp the night before they reached the North Fork of the Canadian. The cattle walk-bawled and kept milling slowly instead of bedding down. The sky kept getting blacker and the heat lightning never left the sky. Thunder rolled like an ominous warning.

Shanghai Kelly put every man on first guard and told them to sing to 'em till daybreak. And he told Ike Smith to go on horse guard with Cotton Eye. But the little old cowhand shook his head. He said that Cotton Eye would fetch enough horses into camp in the morning to furnish them with fresh mounts. He rode on out to the herd with Shanghai Kelly.

The storm hit just about third guard time, with a terrific blast of wind and rain, the lightning cashing and thunder pounding. Fox-fire ran along the top of the wet buffalo grass and sparks of electricity snapped at the tips of the long-horn steers. The herd was spooked, milling. Then, without warning, the lightning and thunder clashed together in a chain bolt that struck the middle of the herd. There was a blinding white glare, and the whole world rocked. The herd was stampeding.

It caught Shanghai Kelly and Ike Smith and Clabe Barlow and Barlow's two tough hands within stone's throw of one another. The blinding white glare stunned them.

There was a metallic taste in Shanghai Kelly's mouth and the inside of his head seemed to explode. It might have been a full minute or a split-second before he could see anything but that glare that seared his eyes.

Then he saw things become a nightmare of running steers piling up. A riderless horse. Two dead horses and dead riders on the ground. And there was Ike Smith on his hands and knees, like a man that's been knocked down and is groggy and trying to stand on his legs. Clabe Barlow was struggling to free his leg from under his dead, lightning-struck horse.

Shanghai Kelly grabbed the trailing bridle reins of the loose horse. He managed to lift Ike Smith off the ground and straddle the horse. Smith grabbed the saddle horn and hung on.

Cattle were charging all around them in their wild stampede. Shanghai saw Clabe Barlow's rain wet face as yellow as a lemon. He was trying to pull his leg from under the dead weight of his horse.

Shanghai swung from his horse. Panic added to his giant strength as he heaved

and lifted the dead horse. And Clabe Barlow slid his leg free. He lifted Barlow up behind the dazed, lightning-stunned Ike Smith.

"Hang onto Ike!" he bellowed through the din of thunder and the clash of pounding hoofs and horns. "Let go Ike and I'll kill you, Barlow!"

Leading the scared horse with its double burden, he spurred his own horse clear of the stampede. Kelly was moving like a man in the grip of a nightmare. His head was splitting with pain and his arms felt like wooden clubs. He was shaking so that his teeth rattled. His hair and eyebrows and whiskers were singed and his face as black as if he had been fighting a prairie fire.

One second the whole world was a blinding white glare and the next instant it was pitch dark, with the rain a solid sheet of water. Mud came half way to a horse's hocks.

Shanghai Kelly never knew how long they took to reach the sodden camp. The cook was lightning-scared and drinking whiskey like it was water. Cotton Eye was holding about a fourth of his remuda there at camp.

There was nothing to do but wait for daylight to break. At last, singly, or in small bunches, the cowpunchers came drifting into camp out of the spent storm. Sodden and silent, with fear still glazing their eyes.

Save for the two tough cowhands who had been killed by that terrific bolt of lightning, there were no casualties. They stood in the water and mud around the mess wagon and drank raw whiskey from tin cups, waiting for daylight.

Big Shanghai Kelly's grin made his singed and blackened face an unearthly, grisly mask from which his green eyes glittered.

As daylight grayed the sky Clabe Barlow limped over to where Shanghai Kelly and Ike Smith sat on the tongue of the chuck wagon.

"I'll help you gather your scattered cattle," he said. "I'll make every man in this outfit work till we all sweat blood. Then I'm pullin' out. You're welcome to them Figger 8 steers. Git yourself a crew of men from Perico to take the place of your shanghai outfit. That's the least I kin do for a man that saved my life."

"No need to feel thataway about it, Clabe," said Shanghai Kelly. "And I'll keep this shanghai outfit. You helped me in a tight back at Tascosa. We're even. Keep your cattle. . . . Unless you'd like to set into a poker game with 'em."

For the first time since lightning had killed a horse under him, Clabe Barlow grinned. It wasn't much of a grin.

"You're a hell of a man, Shanghai!" He lifted his tin cup of whiskey and drank.

When he had limped away Ike Smith took a drink. His puckered eyes glinted and a slow grin spread across his leathery face.

"Clabe Barlow is right, Big Mister. You're one hell of a man!"

THEY lay over on the North Fork of the Canadian for a week. It took them that long to gather the scattered cattle and pick up what horses had been spilled.

Shanghai Kelly worked his crew of cowpunchers as they had never worked before. The whiskey keg was empty and most of the grub had been spoiled by the rain, and they filled their empty bellies with beef and spuds and beans and bread and washed it down with strong black coffee. For twenty hours out of every twenty four he drove them.

The lightning had killed about twenty-five head of cattle. Fifty head or more had been crippled and had to be killed. But the feed was good and the rest of the cattle put on the tallow they had run off in the stampede.

When the work was done, Shanghai Kelly rode into the little cowtown of Felt with his outfit. For twenty hours out of every twenty-four, he had fed them on poor grub, driven them like a slave driver, cussed them, taunted them, knocked any man down who tried to act sullen. He never once spoke to Clabe Barlow except to cuss him out and pile more work on him.

He had a six-shooter in his hand most of the time, ready to club or shoot any man that showed fight. His face was still tinted black, his singed hair and eyebrows

and whiskers and his flat-lipped grin gave him a mask that must have haunted the few hours sleep he gave his crew of shanghaied cowhands. And when the cattle were on feed and water, gathered and ready for the trail again, he told them all to saddle their town horses.

Only Ike Smith and Cotton Eye had escaped the roaring bellow of his cursing. Silent, hard-eyed little old Ike Smith and the young tow-headed nighthawk who told Ike Smith that the lightning must have struck Shanghai Kelly and made the big trail boss locoed. Cotton Eye was scared.

"Unless I'm a pore judge of men," Ike Smith told the young nighthawk, "we ain't seen nothin' yet. Wait till he gits this outfit to town."

Now with the cattle on good feed and water, and the remuda thrown into a horse pasture on the North Fork, Shanghai Kelly took every man in his outfit, even the cook and nighthawk, and rode to Felt. He lined them up at the bar and bought the first round of drinks.

Shanghai Kelly needed a shave and haircut. His flat-lipped grin was more like a snarl and the brogue crept into his voice as it did when he was fighting mad.

" 'Tis the last domned drink ye scuts will iver have set up by Shanghai Kelly! Ye white livered, gutless, double-crossin' sons o' yellow bellied coyotes! Ye snakes in the grass!

"Ye're in debt to me, down to the last wan av yez! But I'll take ye no fu'ther up this cattle trail. Cotton Eye has fetched yer lousy bedrolls to town and dumped 'em off. Yer saddles are on Clabe Barlow's horses. Ye've forked the last S geldin' ye'll iver straddle. Ye double-crossin' scuts!

"I saved yer cattle-rustlin', thievin' 'breed hide, Barlow, fer wan purpose. That's to knock yer domned block off when I've taken me money's worth outa the hides av these shanghaied things that pass theirselves off fer cowhands. I'll bate ye till ye can't crawl, Barlow, after I'm done takin' what they owe Shanghai Kelly outa their skunk hides!"

Shanghai Kelly unbuckled his cartridge belt and holstered gun and tossed them over the bar. Then he cleared the saloon of a couple of poker tables and some chairs by throwing them through the window into the street.

Then with a banshee wailing roar he waded in, his huge hairy fists smashing. Unclenching to pick a man by the seat of his pants and the neck of his shirt, by his hair or by an arm and leg, and heave the man through the broken window.

They charged him from all sides and he smashed them with flailing fists. Whenever one of his blows landed there was the dull crack of smashed bone and the blood spurted. And those he knocked down he let crawl off.

Ike Smith and Cotton Eye had guns in their hands. Ike Smith's six-shooter covered Clabe Barlow, backing the man from No Man's Land into a corner.

"Kill the first one of 'em that goes for a gun, Cotton Eye!" Ike Smith's creaky, brittle voice cut like a knife through the din of the fighting ruckus.

On the street outside cowpunchers had gathered to watch the fight. A couple wore cattle inspector badges. They sat their horses and peered through the smashed windows and the open doorway where the swinging half doors had been torn from their hinges by the powerful hands of Shanghai Kelly. And they were watching the damndest ruckus they had ever hoped to witness.

That big red-headed trail boss, his shirt and undershirt ripped to shreds, was grinning through the grime and blood. One man, the notorious Shanghai Kelly, fist-whipping more than a dozen tough cowpunchers he had cussed and taunted into fighting madness!

"Come all ye lily livered scuts! Don't crawl off like coyotes with yer tails between yer laigs! Ye ain't givin' Shanghai Kelly enough av a fight to work up a good sweat!"

Smashing, tearing, grabbing men and banging their skulls together and throwing them out through the windows, where they lay bleeding and broken in the heavy yellow dust. Roaring like a big red bull, his bloodshot green eyes glittered in his blackened face.

Shanghai Kelly threw the last man out through the window. He stood there in the middle of the blood spattered floor, naked to the waist, bloody and bruised and cut by jackknives that some of them

had used. His huge barrel chest heaving, his legs spread wide. His big hands clenching and unclenching as his glassy green eyes fixed on Clabe Barlow.

"Turn him loose, Little Feller!" Shanghai Kelly panted.

"He's all yourn, Big Mister!"

IKE SMITH shoved his gun into its old shabby holster. But as his hand came free of its wooden butt, Clabe Barlow's gun belched a streak of flame. The little old cowhand threw himself sideways. But Barlow's .45 slug had broken Ike Smith's right arm below the shoulder.

Barlow whirled to shoot the unarmed Shanghai Kelly. He was too big a target to miss. Barlow's opaque black eyes glittered murderously.

But as his gun swung around, young Cotton Eye came out of his bewildered daze. His bullet grazed the ribs of the tough rustler, jerking him off balance so that the renegade's bullet missed Kelly.

Cotton Eye's tanned young face was drained of blood and his mild blue eyes were fever bright. He was badly scared and with plenty of reason.

A brittle oath from Ike Smith whirled Barlow around to face that little old cowman who now had his long-barreled six-shooter in his left hand. And a split-second before Clabe Barlow's gun cracked, Ike Smith shot him in the chest. And the tough cowhand from No Man's Land went down, sagging like an empty sack.

Smith stepped over the dead body and walked over to Cotton Top, who was looking white and shaken.

"Load my gun, button," said Ike. His puckered eyes squinted almost shut and he took a drink from the neck of the bar bottle. Then shoved the bottle at Kelly.

"It's you and me now, Big Mister."

Ike Smith fished in his pocket and pulled out the legal paper that bore the seal of Texas. And a stock inspector badge. He laid them on the bar. Blood from his wounded arm was dripping from his dangling hand onto the floor.

"The owners of them stray irons signed that paper makin' me their rep. They claimed you'd got 'em drunk and pokered 'em outa their money. They was pore losers. Cotton Eye was with you when you dickered fer them cattle. He says you dealt fair with them fellers. I'm willin' to take Cotton Eye's word ag'in theirs that you're entitled to all the cattle in your S road iron.

"I managed fer the stock inspector badge. I hired a picked crew of Texas cowhands and sent 'em on ahead outa Tascosa. Told 'em to wait fer the trail herd at Perico. And we'd whup Clabe Barlow and his two tough gun-slingers and your double-crossin' shanghaied cowpunchers an' take over."

Ike Smith grinned faintly.

"What kin are you to Red River Smith?" asked Shanghai Kelly.

"No kin," snapped Ike Smith. "But it shore bothered Clabe Barlow—wonderin'!"

"You got mule-headed at Perico, Big Mister. "Wouldn't let me'n them boys run off Clabe Barlow and your shanghaied crew. So I told the boys to trail us on to the North Fork of the Canadian and to be handy when Clabe Barlow made his play to take over the trail herd. I never aimed to let that breed from No Man's Land git away with it.

"Then the lightnin' storm taken the play away from everybody. You saved Clabe Barlow so's you could kill him with your hands." The grizzled little old man cackled mirthlessly. "Me, mebbe so I'm no better than Clabe Barlow. I bought them stray brand nesters off fer a few dollars. Got me a law badge. Aimed to take away your herd with that signed paper and a tin badge. Did you know that, Big Mister?"

Shanghai Kelly's voice was a half chuckle. "I had notions along them lines, Little Feller."

Shanghai Kelly pointed towards the mounted cowpunchers outside who were whipping the beaten shanghaied crew out of town with quirts and doubled ropes.

"Them's your Texans, Little Feller?"

Ike Smith nodded. "I told my story, Big Mister. There's the damned paper and law badge. I'm shut of 'em. You kin fill your gun-hand. Now!"

Shanghai Kelly grinned down at the salty little old cowhand with his bullet-smashed arm and his puckered, hard eyes.

"I might poker you outa them Figger 8 cattle before we git to the north end of the trail. And I'll gamble them

Texas cowhands into debt to me by the time we git there. But you kin put up that gun. Me'n you never had no kind of a quarrel, Little Feller. I'd be proud to claim you fer a pardner."

The color flooded back into Cotton Eye's tanned young face. His mild blue eyes misted. "Goshamighty! Pardners!"

"You likewise, button," said Shanghai Kelly. "He's a kinda mav'rick, Little Feller. I sorta put him in my road iron. He taken to you. And like you say, his word is good and his judgment ain't wrong. Cotton, will you see kin you rustle a doctor? The Little Feller's damn nigh bled hisself white, standin' here."

Shanghai Kelly shoved a bottle into Ike Smith's hand. Ike's puckered eyes matched his grin. "One hell of a Big Mister!" he said.

"And Cotton Eye!" bellowed Shanghai Kelly as the young nighthawk started out the door, "Holler at them Texans. Tell 'em that before they ride out to camp to take over the herd, to come back here. I'll fight 'em fer the drinks! Winner sets up the house!"

While the saloon man was fixing a bandage and tourniquet around Ike Smith's wounded arm, Shanghai Kelly, swaggered onto the street.

"Come on, ye Texicans that's goin' up the trail with me an' the Little Feller an' Cotton Eye! Shanghai Kelly never worked a crew in his life that he couldn't whip! I'll take ye all on in a bunch. One big happy fam'ly! Come on, ye Texicans!"

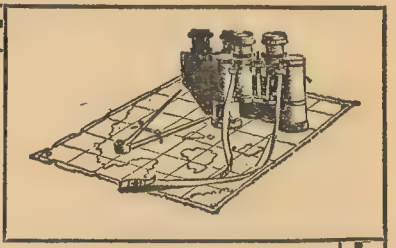
That was the way of Shanghai Kelly, trail boss. The Texans rode back grinning. Shanghai Kelly would whip them, poker them out of their money and give that money back to them, like as not, at the end of the trail. He'd work them hard and cuss them out. But he'd go through hell, high water and lightning for any man in his outfit.

"And may Shanghai Kelly," grinned Ike Smith, "never change his ways!"

Slowly Ike Smith tore his legal paper into shreds and dropped the pieces of torn paper and the nickle-plated law badge into the brass cuspidor. Pardner or no pardner, Ike Smith was not using his Law to help move that trail herd north to Cheyenne. Shanghai Kelly wouldn't want it the easy way. The big Mister leaned on no Law.

"There," Ike Smith told the saloonman as they watched him wave his new cowpuncher crew into the saloon, "stands one hell of a big man. The Big Mister packs a heart even bigger than the rest of him. But dammit, don't you dare tell nobody!"

THE END



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• • • FUGITIVES FROM THE

By TOM ROAN

CHAPTER ONE

Manhunt in Purgatory

OLD BILBO GREEN struggled on to eastward up the narrow, timber-walled canyon for hours after the possemen behind had deserted him. He was a little, rheumy-eyed man in gray on a big bay that made him look like a dried-up wart in the saddle. Being little and dried-up fooled a lot of people. He was seventy years old, and the one

Into a flaming inferno of roaring forest fire rode the Santa Fe Kid, hunted for the killing of Black Jules DeVeree. . . . And after him pounded old Bilbo Green, bounty-hungry lawman, who had sworn that not even the blazing fires of Hell could keep him from bringing the Kid back to the waiting, empty noose. . . .

FLAMES

The bay took to the air with him, in a wall-eyed, belly-buster jump. . . .

Gripping Manhunt Novelette

man in the Idaho State Constabulary who could still ride down most gents half his age who tried to follow an outlaw trail with him. After nearly eighty hours in the saddle, he was still hell-bent to take the Santa Fé Kid back to Clearwater County on a first-class killing charge.

Not for a fifty-dollar bill and a fine saddle horse would he have admitted that he was lost. He knew a lot about these deep, mountain-rimmed canyons west of the Montana line. Gifted with the un-

canny trail instinct of a bloodhound, he had trailed half the outlaws up here that ever hit Idaho during his forty-odd years as an officer, but he had never seen this canyon before. Yet he knew that he was still on his man-trail, even if he could not exactly point it out to other damn' fools. When the possemen had wanted to turn back, he had told them to head for home and crawl under the bed with the rest of their dad-burned pups.

Mid-August thunderheads mottled the sky, but not a breath of wind was stirring. For weeks no drop of rain had fallen. The timber everywhere looked as dry as a bone. Grass along the canyon floor had wilted and curled into brown lumps in most places. A match dropped anywhere in Northern Idaho or Northwestern Montana would be like a keg of nitro-glycerine tossed overboard into Hell.

Yet old Bilbo Green did not once think of fire. Only two things were on his mind —water and the Santa Fé Kid. For three or four hours he had been expecting to come upon a creek or a spring. This whole country up here was filled with streams and lakes. A man who knew his way around should find water easily within an hour's ride in almost any direction.

He came upon it after another hour, and it was as shocking as a pistol ball breaking a man's bones when he got to it. The canyon made a sharp bend to the north and seemed to suddenly widen into a deep, mile-wide valley. To his left a small stream split down the valley and disappeared in the mouth of a narrow gorge. The bay snorted and plunged into a gallop. When they reached the edge of the stream Green flung down.

The horse lunged back, snorting when he tried to drink. Green stuck his hand down in the stream, and jerked it out with an oath. The water was danged nigh scalding! He thought of a hot spring somewhere close by upstream, but the shock came when he glanced on up the creek to a V-shaped break in the walls of the valley.

It was as if one was looking up at the smoking rim of a monstrous volcano ready to spill red-hot lava and thundering fireworks on the country below. A reddish-yellow cast hung up there, shimmering and dancing along the rim of the hills. Above that ugly cast black smoke was ballooning and mushrooming up a mile high in the sky before bending forward as if a strong wind was roaring behind.

"Some damn fool," growled the old man, "has set the woods afire!"

A noise down the high rims of the gorge answered him. It was a sharp, splintering crash, accompanied by a flash blinding to the eye for a moment as it came slithering down out of a silver-rimmed little thunderhead. Another sizzling bolt cut loose from the sky straight above the valley. Splitting into four great chains it came lashing down with the noise of a battery of artillery suddenly going off right under a man's nose.

Mouth filled with the taste of burned electricity, Green looked back at the high rims of the gorge. The timber up there was as thick as the hair on a shaggy dog's back. Rising from it was a writhing dark streak that instantly made one think of an enormous black-snake lifting itself high on its tail against the sky under a great, spreading mushroom of steel-gray smoke.

"Hittin' all 'round us, big boy." He turned, stroking the nervous bay's nose with the palm of his hand. "She's hell up yonder." He turned and stared back up the valley. "A crown fire or I'm missin' my guess. An'," he glanced back at the hot stream, "underbrush lickin' up the world right along with it."

Lightning crashed again, jarring him back to the growing danger flaming up all around him. He had seen forest fires in these hills, whole mountain ranges burned over, homes destroyed at every hand, railroad trestles burned out, entire towns wallowed down under flames and left in charred ruins—with the blackened bodies of men, women and children lying among the carcasses of horses, cattle and dogs in what had once been the streets.

Red hell wept in this part of Idaho and Northwest Montana when the forests got afire. Terrified game died in the hills. The feathered creatures of the air went blind and crazy from the heat and smoke, dropping dead on the wing by the countless thousands. Old Bilbo Green had once seen the time when he had flipped boiled salmon and trout from a steaming hot stream that had been icy-cold before the fire came along. A man needed only

a little salt to sprinkle on his fish when times got like that in the Panhandle of Idaho.

A BURNING gust of wind suddenly whipping down the valley and a deadly smell in the air told him it was time to creak the saddle leather trying to get out of here.

Water was still gnawing at his thoughts when he turned to the horse with his mind made up to head downstream. There was something grimly hopeless about it, and yet he had a notion that he might find more water down that gorge. He had once heard of a man out-running the hot water in a stream pouring down out of hills where a forest fire was raging. That hope was in his mind. If it did not come out like that the stream would at least take him to the lower levels somewhere —maybe into a big, wide valley with a lake in the center of it! When pushed by a forest fire one could think of all manner of things.

As he flung himself back into the tired bay's saddle he glanced up the valley. It was as if all Hell itself was now spilling over up there. The reddish-yellow cast had turned to leaping sheets of flame. It was like powder catching fire along the roof of the forests. The wind swirled down through the timber-tops, bellying up great, exploding sheets of sparks and smoke in the underbrush. Gigantic flames that formed the crown fire in the tops of the trees appeared to lick forward without effort or smoke.

He started riding, both spurs jammed to the bay's flanks. He had a feeling that he was darting along with an invisible blow-torch at the back of his scrawny old neck. A man could be broiled to a blister far ahead of such a fire as that, and before he had gone a mile on the doggedly galloping bay he saw that he was riding out of one death trap and heading into another.

The lightning that had struck down the rim of the gorge had started a second inferno all of its own. The whole rim was becoming a blazing furnace up there in the timber to his left, and the lightning was growing worse. It was flashing everywhere, the thunder rumbling rolling guns across the sky as if the elements were buckling up enormous sheet-iron houses and tearing them down.

It was the end and he knew it by the time the hard-blowing bay had carried him another mile. The gorge here made an abrupt swing to the right. A great, jagged mass of cliffs loomed ahead, rearing skyward for three hundred feet.

For a second he wondered where the stream would go without damming back into a big lake when it struck the foot of those rocks, and then he could see that there was a low break in the foot of the cliffs where the creek was suddenly taking a wild downward pitch to go plunging out of sight.

"Hell!" he snarled. "The same ol' fish tale of jumpin' outa the fryin' pan an' slap-dab in the fire!"

He was still on the south side of the stream. Sand underfoot was deadening the noise of the bay's pounding hoofs. Glancing across the stream he saw a ragged little grove of cottonwoods and a flash of clear water showing through the trees.

It was a big water hole over there, really a spring gushing out from under the rocks. That water would still be nice and cold. He could drink and the horse would drink, too. This time a hot, sweating horse would have all he wanted. It would be the last act of human kindness a man could show his horse before he parted company with him.

Green's mind was made up. He would leave the horse here and try to make his way up those cliffs on foot, but he would not leave the horse to die slow with the fire gradually closing in around him. No, sir! One bullet slammed through the poor brute's brain would take him out of all that.

When he jumped the bay across the hot stream he was so intent on what he was going to do he did not see another horse among the trees.

It was a tall, iron-gray gelding grazing on the end of a long rope in the deep, rich grass beyond the spring with a big Texas saddle on his back.

He saw the horse as he struck the ground, and then saw something else—a man lying on a blanket in the tall grass right at the edge of the water who had

just raised himself to one elbow and was looking him squarely in the eyes over the long, gleaming barrel of a silver-plated .45.

Old Bilbo Green had caught up with the Santa Fé Kid.

CHAPTER TWO

"Never Trust a Lawman!"

THE slow little smile of a loser etched its way through the wrinkles of the old man's face as he lifted his gnarled hands. The bay pushed on, ramming his sweat-dripping nose into the water.

"I know when the other gent on the business end of a hawg-leg holds the better talkin' side of the argument," the old man said.

The Kid had all the markings of a nice young fellow. Fooled a man just to look at him—like some old men fooled others. He was tall and lean, fair-faced and sandy-haired with a big cow-lick above the left eye. Green noticed now that he had removed his left boot and sock. His trouser leg had been pushed up to the knee, and his foot was rammed deep in the icy water.

"Get that bronc's head out of the water, if you ever expect to ride him again!" The Kid's voice was crisply commanding. "Better watch those hands while you're at it. I don't want to kill you, Green. You're a hard old bat, and never give up, but this is one time when your man is not going back to Clearwater County with you."

"All right, Santa Fé." Keeping his left hand up, Green reached forward cautiously and seized the bay's reins, then jerked the horse back. "Yuh got hurt somewhere, didja?"

"Horse fell with me last night." The Kid jerked his head toward the iron-gray. "You had me worn out and dozing in my saddle; got my ankle smashed. Tie that bronc to a limb and ooze over this way. I want your guns."

Green tied the horse to a cottonwood branch overhead, then turned toward him, hands lifted. "I come to take yuh back to Clearwater for shootin' Jules DeVeree, but maybe neither one's goin' back, Santa Fé. Yo've been asleep. Smell or feel anything, Kid?"

"We'll come to questions and answers later." The Kid reached up when he was close enough. He took the old .45's, throwing them in the grass behind him, then felt the man over for other weapons. "Take a seat over there." He nodded to a flat-topped stone ten feet away in the grass. "Don't try to make a jump for your saddle gun."

"Maybe I'm sorter figurin' I won't need that rifle any more, Kid." Green grinned and raked a regular shower of perspiration from his brow with a hooking sweep of a forefinger as he seated himself. "It looks like yuh an' me only come into these wild ol' hills to go to hell together. Look 'round, fella, look 'round yuh! The whole damn world's afire!"

He chuckled when the Kid looked up the gorge and his face went white. The iron-gray nickered nervously on the end of his long rope. The bay stamped his forefeet and champed his bits. Green raked off his old hat and slapped the dust from it. Quietly, as if he had all day about it, he neatly cupped up the brim, reached down and got it full of water, and sat there sipping like a man drinking from an enormous saucer held in both hands.

"Looks bad, don't it, Santa Fé?"

"Damned bad!" corrected the Kid. "The mountains are as dry as a powder house!"

The lightning had been quiet for ten or fifteen minutes except for sheet-flashing here and there. It struck now, up there beyond the rim of the cliffs, and for a few moments the smell and taste of burned electricity was back, robbing one of his breath.

The Kid had slipped his six-shooter back into its holster. Not afraid, not a bit nervous about facing the Law—not one of those kill-quick fools who would shoot first and think afterwards. Pulling his swollen foot and ankle out of the water, he attempted to get up. His lips were like chalk as he slumped back in the grass with a groan the instant his left foot touched the ground.

"Yo've got a bad ankle, Santa Fé." Green poised his old hat in his left hand and pointed with his right. "We oughta

try to get a bandage on it so's yuh can move."

The Kid's blue eyes were cold and hard in the stark-white face as he lay there, lips twisted with pain. "The Law goes to a hell of a trouble at times just to save a man for the rope."

Green reached down, scooping the brim of his hat full of water. "Sometimes I catch myself wonderin' why I've played the game so long. Never could quite bring myself to believe some jumble-jawed judge had a right to say whether a man would hang or live. There's juries of course, but the most of 'em are about the thick-headedest bunch of tinhorns the courts can rake up. Back in the West Virginia moonshine country where I come from years ago they used to say trust a rattlesnake before a copperhead, a juryman just a mite before a copperhead—an' a copperhead before any damn lawyer!

"Still, yuh can't beat the law out, Santa Fé." He was sipping thoughtfully. "It's got too many men livin' on it, lawyers, liars an' judges, an' men like me out chasin' fellas like yuh. Same as head-huntin' in the savage countries, maybe. Some men go in for shootin' grizzly an' cougar, deer an' elk. They kill an' bring their heads home to stuff an' hang on the wall. Others, like me, pack badges an' hunt men here to hang 'em or shut 'em up in pens. Just why'd yuh shoot Jules DeVeree, Kid?"

"Poker game in the Elkhorn Saloon on Salmon Creek!" The Kid snapped it out as if biting ice. "I was winning, an' Jules don't like things to go against him. He tried to go for his shoulder hide-out, an' I blew his guts out under the table." He shrugged. "That's all."

"They say that yuh switched a deck of cards on 'im." The old man was still sipping thoughtfully and watching his face. "It's said, also, yuh got up with yore gun in yore hand an' made the house cash yore winnin' chips. That gives the law the excuse to think it had the right to put a robbery charge agin yuh along with murder. Makes it double bad, young fella."

"Are you trying the case?"

"Nope!" Green shook his head. "Just talkin' to keep from thinkin' of that fire when it gets here."

"All right." The Kid grinned now in spite of his pain. "I did switch a deck on Jules. I switched a straight deck for his crooked one. Jules couldn't win without a marked deck. I won two thousand dollars. He knew the cards were switched. Hell, there was not a mark on them for him to go by! Then he tried to switch in another, and I caught him. He died with his gun half-out of his damned holster. . . ."

He turned, looking up the gorge. "Look at that fire! We've got to—*Damn you!*"

For Bilbo Green had gone into action. Even with death creeping and roaring up all around him, he could not forget that he was still the old prize bull of the State Constabulary out on a manhunt. Dropping his hat he had plunged forward. A stone half as large as his fist was in his right hand.

"Never trust the law, Santa Fé!" yelled Green.

He was an old cougar now. Both the Kid's six-shooters were in their holsters. Driving straight into his man without an instant's warning, Green caught him one quick blow on the side of his head with the stone. Then, like two snarling devils in a death struggle they were locked together and rolling in the grass—each unmindful of the roaring death thrusting its great columns of smoke and heat high in the sky on the rims. . . .

IT WAS a dirty, low-down trick, and the meanest kind of snake would have rarely attempted such a thing. Green cursed himself for it even as he landed on the Kid. It was the one big, ugly streak in him that he had cursed before. An officer who trusted an outlaw was a stark fool—and an outlaw was a fool any old time he gave the Law a chance to slap him down or stick a ball of lead in him. He had always brought in his man, anyway he could get him, and he was going to do it now!

"I don't like this worth a damn!" he growled as he tried to strike again with the stone. "But I come to take yuh back to Clearwater. I aim to shoot both of these broncs an' try to carry yuh on my back over them cliffs to see if we can

find a hole somewhere. If we find it an' live through, then it's back to Clearwater. Hangin's better'n burnin', but if we don't get through, it'll mean burnin' up there somewhere together."

His one real blow had been a glancing one at best. It had raised only a bump on the side of the head, yet it had addled the Kid. Fighting blindly, instinctively, Santa Fé had seized the old wrist and was holding on.

Green was still on top, supple as an old boa constrictor. Legs and spurred heels twisting downward, he was feeling for the Kid's smashed ankle. He found it. With his feet locked together he had a crushing grip on the ankle between the calves of his legs—a hold hard enough to make the Devil himself bawl out in pain.

But not even a grunt came from him. Hands and forearms wound in under his arms to pin them to his side. Green lifted his head to stare down into the upturned white face. The Kid sure looked like Old Death, himself. His face was so white that it reminded Green of the face of a frozen dead man with his throat cut that he had hauled out of the ice in Snake River one raw winter. Every muscle was drawn with pain. In a moment the Kid was going to go as limp as a rag.

But the Kid was not like that. With Green's face over his, Santa Fé's head suddenly bobbed in a wicked nod. His forehead caught the old man squarely on the chin. Green's head went back from the shock, a stab of pain shooting down his neck. He felt his hold slip on the Kid's arms for just an instant. But in that instant the Kid's right arm jerked free, and the outlaw got in one furious, straight-driving blow of his own.

It was like a steel hammer smashing a rock. It landed full and flat on the side of the mouth. Bilbo Green heard something smash, and realized that his store-bought teeth were going to glory, just as blackness swallowed him. . . .

When he returned to consciousness he was still thinking about those seventy-dollar plates made for him by a dentist in Pocatello. He had reason to be thinking of them. He was lying there on his right side spitting the fragments of them out of the side of his mouth. His arms were behind him, wrists locked together with his rusty old handcuffs.

HE HEARD the Kid before he saw him—heard him sobbing and cursing as he came hobbling forward with his iron-gray. He had made himself a peg to limp on from his left knee downward. That peg was Green's rifle, lashed stock-downward to the outer side of his leg with a rawhide lariat. He saw Green's eyes were open.

"I should stick a .45 down your throat and blow you apart! And I'd do it, damn you, for a lead dime with a hole through it!"

"Yo're a liar, Santa Fé." The old man was as cool as a pig on ice, though he could feel real heat coming down the gorge now and hear the crackling noise of flames that seemed to be settling in the very tops of the cottonwoods just above him. "It ain't in yuh. Yo're too soft, Kid. The only thing hard about yuh is that shell yuh wear. If yuh had done to me what I done to yuh—well, hell, I'd already have yore carcass shuffled full of lead!"

"By God, Green, I may do it yet!"

The old man leered. "Yuh ain't got what it takes to shoot a man lyin' on his ribs with his hands locked behind his back."

"Maybe you're right." A wicked glint filled the Kid's eyes as he stared down at him. "Maybe I'm just leaving you here like that. In twenty or thirty minutes you'll be only a blister."

"Yuh—yuh couldn't do a rattlesnake like that, Kid!" Real fear gripped Bilbo Green for the first time. "I aimed to try to pack yuh up them cliffs on my back. Didn't I try to tell yuh I aimed to shoot both broncs to keep 'em from standin' here an' just dyin' a slow death?"

"When a man shoots a horse of mine," sneered the Kid, "he's taking a shot at me." He started to limp on, then halted to look back, eyes intently curious in spite of his pain. "I wonder how roast law meat will taste to the buzzards when this fire's done. Much obliged for the bay. I may make it out of here yet."

By a furious twist, Green managed to

sit up, eyes widening with growing terror as he looked at fire eating along the rims.

"Good Gawd, fella, at least yuh can put a slug through my head! I—I aimed to try to take yuh out. Honest, I did, Santa Fé! It—it ain't human to leave me like this. For Gawd's sake, gimme a chance to try to scale them cliffs an' find a deep hole somewhere. This fire'd drive a man right into the den with a grizzly! Why—why, Kid, I'd —I—" He caught himself, words clogging in his throat.

He had never before in all his seventy years had to beg and cower before any man. Danged if he was going to do it now. No, sir, by Gawd, sir, he would roast alive before he'd do that! It'd be a heap sight easier!

The Kid had hobbled on to the bay, untying his reins from the branch. The bay had cooled off, and Green watched as the Kid hobbled back to the spring with the horse to allow him to drink his fill of water. The iron-gray was already drinking. The Kid got down painfully between the horses, lying on his stomach to drink with them.

When he arose he picked up Green's big hat, filled the brim with water, and hobbled back to him.

"Drink!" he ordered. "You may be yelling and crying for your next drink in Hell!"

The old man drank greedily, as if it would be the last water he would ever touch to his lips. "I could get to water myself if yuh'd help me a little. Yuh ain't really goin' to leave me, are yuh Santa Fé?"

"I should!" snapped the Kid. "Should stake you out in that water to be there when it starts to boil. Drink up! We're getting to hell out of here. I know a way out that a badge-packing polecat like you wouldn't find in a thousand years. Git goin'."

Hope flamed brighter in Green's eyes. "Damn, Santa Fé! Yore mammy musta been a right decent woman, but there musta been some on yore daddy's side who was joe-darters, countin' the rep they give yuh down on Salmon Crick. Mind fillin' the hat once more, son? Seems like I could use another drink."

CHAPTER THREE

Through Hell's Red Hot Gates

IT WAS like pulling eyeteeth for the Santa Fé Kid. That ankle was hurting him all over. He looked like he was dying with pain when he tried to mount the iron-gray.

Like most horses ridden by white men the horse did not want a rider to mount him from the right side, Indian fashion, but it was the only way the Kid could do it. He made it at last, and then swung back, staring at Green for a moment as the old man stood there. It looked like weakness when he reached down, felt in the old man's vest pocket for a key, and took the handcuffs off his wrists.

"That's the last straight deal you'll get from me," he warned. "If you try pulling another joker I'll shoot your heart out and throw it in your face. Remember that and do just what I say. Your six-shooters are in the bottom of that spring."

"Yuh pick the way an' I'll follow, Santa Fé." The lawman grinned sheepishly. "I figure on tryin' to be a good little dogie from now on."

"Shut up and ride!" ordered the Kid. "You don't get behind me or catch my head turned again."

Green rode exactly as he was told. The heat was becoming unbearable, but the Kid had not lied to him. Before they had gone eighty yards, with flaming timber beginning to break and tumble over the rims, a hole appeared in the foot of the cliffs.

It was completely hidden by a cluster of dwarfed pines and a shoulder of jagged rock jutting out from the foot of the cliffs. A man might have passed within thirty feet of it without knowing it was there.

"Keep a tight rein with one hand and hold the other above your head," warned the Kid. "In places the roof is low and you're apt to get a mean bump. Leave it all to your horse, and pray!"

Green slumped in his saddle. Before long the darkness was so inky black one could imagine a wall of velvet pressing against his face. In places the going was so slow it was but little more than a snail's pace. Now and then the bay halted,

snorting and stamping his feet. At one place a hot, sickly-smelling steam boiled around them, telling them the water was scalding and probably spilling down from some stream up there under the raging fires where millions of tons of red-hot timber was falling high overhead.

Green never knew how long or how far they traveled in the black world around them. He glimpsed light a number of times, a mere streak here, a dull glow there, and once he could smell deadly gas around him. It always came when forest fires were raging. A man would not live long in this place once it filled with the fumes from the flames certain to burn at each end of the hole.

When real light glowed ahead it was murky and constantly changing in color. The fire, Green knew, had gone on ahead of them. As he pulled rein it looked like the whole world was ablaze ahead of them. He turned in his saddle, looking at the Santa Fé Kid hopelessly, unvoiced questions beginning to tremble his white old lips. The Kid's face was as hard as a cocked gun, his eyes two blue bullets.

"It's a swift dash from here, Green," he explained. "There's a valley ahead at the foot of the slope—if we can reach it. But we won't be able to stay there. We're pushing on for an old abandoned mine I know, close to a railroad trestle across a river. Our only chance is to get there fast."

Green lifting a hand that trembled as it pointed. "But it looks like ever'thing's afire overhead just in front of us! We'll be cooked to a cinder, Kid!"

"The forest on the slope here is not very thick." The Kid's voice was tense and harsh, like that of a man getting ready to fight. "If you've got any real guts and that horse can fly—well, we may pull through. Stay loose in your saddle, shoot straight ahead and keep the steel in your bay until you see your way out from under the trees. *Ride!* Don't sit there and stare like a fool!"

Green yelled as he slammed the steel to the bay. Everything behind him had been turning to a hell all of its own, but plunging out of that hole under a burning forest roof was like diving straight into the king hell of them all. Burning twigs were falling, and sometimes great limbs of flaming wood were coming down.

The terrified bay brawled, stumbled once, threatening to fall before he could right himself. This was damnation through which a man had to ride fast and wild, trusting all to sure hoofs—and stay in the saddle or die!

NO TWO men ever rode through a quicker, meaner place to die. The fire was worse ahead than at the base of the great shoulder of hills. The timber down the slope had caught fire first, giving it a chance to flame up like a sky-high pile of loose, dry shingles. Dead limbs and trees were naturally going first, being like tinder just waiting for the spark to turn them into roaring torches.

Limbs and tree-tops were coming down, snapping off short and long, making a terrific crashing in the other branches and sending the sparks showering and popping like barrels of bullets exploding in the air. They crashed among the hurling arrows of smoke and red-hot bits, chunks and great poles of wreckage around the flying horses and the two hard-riding men.

For the time being, old Bilbo Green had severed all relations with the Idaho State Constabulary. The devil with the Constabulary, Clearwater County and Salmon Creek! Now a man thought only of himself and his horse. Here was a race with death lapping and popping all around and showering down on his head. A way clear at one moment was apt to be blocked by a flaming log tearing down from above at the next second.

Beneath the fire it seemed a tornado was blowing. Fire needed air, lots and lots of wind, to make it burn and roar like that. It was sucking it in from all directions—sucking it in and under in Gawdawful currents strong enough to reel one in his saddle. That gigantic draft fed those raging flames ever growing brighter and hotter up where the timber-tops seemed to be fighting a battle with the sky in a savage attempt to tear it down.

Bilbo Green rode loose and hard. Even the Santa Fé Kid was forgotten behind

him. Everything was forgotten but a glimpse now and then of the valley ahead, and yet all credit for taking him through really belonged to the tall, strong bay.

The horse was like a monster leaping, plunging on four feet, a thing gone crazy as hell. He jumped the smoking logs, flung this way and that like the fast-lashing tail of a kite in a strong wind as he dodged piles of flaming wreckage suddenly taking shape ahead.

Scorched to the bone when he came out from under that inferno, the old man was sobbing and reeling, sometimes praying, sometimes cursing and chattering like a panic-stricken ape. The valley was in front of him now, bare of timber, and a swift, shallow river in the distance.

The Kid had come through, tilted low in his saddle, right foot desperately clinging to its stirrup, the bobbing rifle still roped and tied to his left leg. Suffering all the pain of a lost soul—and still riding like the bands playing Hell Among the Yearlings back there!

Still watching the Santa Fé Kid ride, Green was startled a minute later, and a wild yell of alarm tore from his old lips. The bay took to the air with him in a wall-eyed, belly-buster jump that a horse always makes when plunging head-on over the bank of a stream. He came down, tail in the air, head up, and every leg as stiff as a board. A second later there was a tremendous splash, and a great sob of relief flooded over the old man as the water whipped up around him, drenching him to the skin.

Another stirring epic of the northern timberland, a novel of stage-trail outlaws and the men who tamed them, tops the lineup in November 10 STORY WESTERN. Be sure to read Charles W. Tyler's "Gun Rider For the Overland" . . . Stories by Tom Roan, Cliff Farrell, Fred Gipson and six other leading writers round out this all-star issue! 10 Stories for 10 Cents! Now on sale!

But the danger was not yet over. Flames were still reaching far out overhead like angry arms and ten thousand forked red tongues. The sky was going black, and yet Bilbo Green knew that the sun had not gone down.

The valley was already smoking. Fires were starting in the grass here and there where flying bits of burning twigs were falling after being carried far out on the wind from the blazing tops of the timber.

Even that river in the distance could be hot enough to boil tough old bull-meat when a man got to it. Millions of tons of flaming timber might be down in the water, bringing it to a boil like Indians sometimes brought great pots and kettles of water to scalding by throwing in heated stones.

Smells of burning cloth soon told the old man he was afire in a dozen spots where live coals had fallen on him. He was beating out the fire with his hands, and cursing the little white blisters jumping up in his skin when he looked back. He had to see the Santa Fé Kid before he actually remembered him.

Never had anything felt so good! The water was sickly-warm, and yet it was cooling to one who was parched from head to heel. As the bay started swimming, Green was out of the saddle and dipping himself up and down beside the horse.

A splash shot up behind him. Tall, straight as a ramrod and white lipped in the saddle, smoking in a dozen spots where sparks had set his clothing afire, the Kid and his iron-gray struck the water. They went down, smashing out of sight for an instant, and then came up, water flying. The Kid was still in the saddle. He stayed there because of his leg, deep-riding the iron-gray until the scared brute's forefeet touched the graveled bottom. The horse pulled himself up, belly-deep, and rammed his muzzle down to drink.

Green had gone on across and was waiting in the edge of the river. His bay was still too scared to drink. The old man sat there watching, staring first at the blazing hell he had come out of, then at the white-lipped Kid.

The Kid was sitting silently, rubbing that left leg. There was something about him that reminded Green of a sorely hurt little boy doing his damndest not to break out in a fit of sobbing and wailing. Guts! That Santa Fé Kid had 'em—all the way from his toes to his eyebrows!

A man could like that kind of a fella, Clearwater County and Salmon Creek or not. When one thought of Jules DeVeree—well, Jules just couldn't stack up to the Santa Fé Kid at all. Hell, Jules was just a big, fat-faced, black-eyed pile of hawg-meat! So damn' big his coffin would fill a wagon-box before they got 'im in the ground!

It would really be a shame to hang a man for killing a fella like Jules, even if Green had sworn to DeVeree's pretty little blonde widow that he would bring back the killer of her dark-hawg Jules, dead or alive.

HONKYTONK women had a habit of getting men to promise any old thing, especially when they took an old buck up to their room for two hours to wrap their arms around his neck an' cry on his chest. Trixie DeVeree had even kissed him no less'n forty times an' swore she would be his woman forever if only he would not fail to get his man.

"Funny, though," he whispered to himself, eyes again on the fire. "When I said we'd probably shoot it out when I caught up she got all scared an' begged me to bring 'im in alive an' unhurt."

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Her twenty-two or -three, trim an' neat as a little red saddle, an' the Kid good lookin' as he is—an' me with a wife to boot! Still. . . . Yuh all right, Kid?"

"We've got to push on," the Kid answered him as if every bone in his body was aching. "Don't start worrying about me. There's still plenty of fire ahead."

Green nodded soberly. "My wet clothes are beginnin' to feel like they're startin' to scald. I got a tight-corked bottle of headache pills in my saddle pockets. Reckon they'd do yore pain some good?"

"No! I'll get along. Let's keep going. Head up the river! There's no time to lose."

Green frowned as he swung his horse out of the stream and steeled on up the bank. It was a little cooler on this side of the river, but it was getting darker by the minute. He looked at his watch; its tight hunting case had kept out the water. It was still running, the hands showing that it was only ten minutes before six o'clock.

They turned up the river bank with the Kid keeping his distance and directing the way. Both horses were completely worn to a frazzle by that dash through the timber fire. Green could feel the bay trembling under him, and sometimes threatening to stumble to a halt.

Seemed like the whole Continental Divide was ablaze. People would die—an' what deaths! Herds of cattle, horses and sheep would curl up like death-stricken spiders in the little valleys. Cowboys, buckaroos and sheepherders would go with their stock. Many a lonely little ranch house would be wiped out, and towns would go up by the score. Death rode like howling hell when it rode these hills in its flaming cloak.

A locomotive whistle came to them as they were turning a bend where the hills at either side of the river were gradually closing in. The frantic whistling sounded like forty wildcats raging and squawling in a trap, the noise raking at a man's nerves. Out of that noise came the distant roar of a train, going like sixty through the burning hills with an engineer at the throttle praying for the tracks to stay under him, the bridges to hold, and the falling logs to keep off the rails until he could get his loaded train through.

Green saw it as they finished rounding the bend. It was like a smoking stream of fire itself up there, swinging across a tall trestle above the river—pounding west as fast as the eight big drivers would roll. Behind the engine followed four boxcars, three flats and a little red caboose swinging on for all it could stand behind.

The railroad company was trying to get people out of the little towns along the tracks. Bundles of their snatched-up belongings were on the flat cars, and some of those bundles were afire. Anxious white faces of men, women and children

stared out of the doors of the boxcars.

They were all prayin' up there, Green reckoned. Tryin' to help the hog-head at the throtttle pray—and that hog-head was sure whipping steel and sawing on his whistle while the fireman worked like a sweat-streaming devil bailing in the coal, keeping that boiler hot and an inch of water in the glass to make that engine steam!

It was there for only a moment, and then it was gone, leaving the high trestle swaying and smoking behind. But it was not the last they were to see or hear of it.

Brakes screaming, whistle sawed wide-open, a terrible sound came down the river. It was as though all the tracks in Idaho were being ripped up, as if all the trains were tearing and smashing into each other. And above all that noise he thought he could hear the death-screams of the women and children.

Green whirled in his saddle and looked at the man behind him. "Gawd, Kid, that damned thing's jumped the tracks up yonder!"

CHAPTER FOUR

When the Buzzards Gather

IT WAS not a far ride to the trestle, but they had to rake blood from their horses to make them break into a gallop. When they came to the trestle there was a mere wild-goat trail to their left. Then, forcing the worn horses up a slope with both animals literally on their knees and crawling, they came to the run-down shacks and dumps of a deep old mine slope in the side of the hill just west of the trestle and fifty yards above the tracks.

The heat was terrific here, hot enough to make a man sweat blood. Above the mine, the world was afire and scorching winds from the burning hills across the river made each foot they progressed like riding into a blast furnace. Neither man nor horse could live long here without a chance to get a fresh breath of air now and then.

One quick look showed them that the train wreck was just ahead and scattered along the side of a curve. Rocks—some of them as large as covered prairie schooners—had been loosened by the heat and falling timber above and had spilled down the high shoulder of hills along the south side of the tracks.

The engine and tender had left the rails, careening over on their sides and carrying two of the boxcars with them. The flat cars had doubled up, crumpling and twisting together as so many smashed sardine tins. The caboose had swung to one side, and was sitting there like a red bird cage ready to topple off in space and down the long slope.

Women and children were still screaming, men yelling, the groan of the dying lifting here and there. Down there in a deep ravine lay the engine, the tender piled atop it and the escaping steam from the boiler hissing skyward.

The fireman lay groaning beside the tracks with two broken legs. The hog-head was down with the engine, true to his post to the end, a dead man with one hand on the throttle, the other on the air. As a last do-or-die act to save the train he had slammed home the throttle, hauled back on the Johnson bar to reverse the engine, and jerked open the throttle again. He must have closed it, realizing that all was lost as the engine took to the air.

"Everybody up the slope who can crawl or drag somebody!"

The Santa Fé Kid's voice carried the clear, far-reaching ring of a cavalry bugle. Men who were able started working their way toward him as he pointed to the old mine. He rode down the slope himself, and came back, reins in his teeth, a woman hauled up under one arm, a child under the other. As fast as his horse could go, he headed for the mine.

"Do something, damn you!" he thundered at Green as the old lawman continued to sit there and stare, pop-eyed in the saddle. "Don't just sit there looking like you want to faint."

They made four trips with the horses, and then the horses were through, ready to drop on their feet. The Kid sent Green and a brakeman with a lantern from the caboose on down in the cool mine slope with half-dying brutes, and then turned back on his improvised peg to see what else he could do.

Bilbo Green lost his head a dozen times

after that. The sight and the heat was enough to drive a man crazy, he reckoned. He called his eyes a liar a dozen times. Just couldn't believe 'em!

Fire had broken out among the wrecked cars. Every man or woman who could crawl was trying to do something. The fireman dragged himself up to the mine and down into the steep, cool slope. A long, gangling woman of forty came from somewhere. Her clothing was smoking, half her hair burned away. In her arms she held a baby, and dragging at her skirts were two more little ones crying their eyes out. A man who looked as blind as a bat in strong light stumbled and sobbed along on his knees behind her.

The Santa Fé Kid was lost from sight no less than a dozen times. Once Green stumbled upon him, finding him lying face-down on the ground with an old granny curled unconscious in the crook of his right arm like a happy monkey fast asleep.

It looked to Green as if both of them were through and had literally shot their wads right there on the slope. Yet he blundered into the Kid many times after that, either hobbling like a drunk on that rifle, or crawling, struggling desperately to pull somebody out of the wreckage.

Green must have passed completely out of the picture a time or two. Maybe more than that. The heat was getting worse. At times when the wind whipped it around it knocked a man sprawling, as quick as a blackjack smash to the temple. A man simply went down, stayed there until the wind changed, or somebody brought a pail of water out of the mine to throw it in his face.

Getting that icy water in the face now and then was like a dream until Green realized that there was somebody actually hurrying about with two big red fire pails taken from the caboose. It was a girl of twenty, slender, dark-haired and as pretty as they come. She was in and out of the picture all the time, flashing here, flashing there—always helping folks to keep them from dying right where they turned all holds loose and drooped.

"Thirty-six of us got on!" Somebody kept yelling that up and down the slope in a half-crying voice. "We were thirty-six without the train crew! Lyd! Lyd! Oh, my God, where's my wife! Lydia! Lydia, dammit, why don't you answer me!"

Everybody's face was as red as a beet, and yet they staggered, stumbled and fought on like wounded ants, dragging others up the slope.

It was growing darker. Once Green found himself sitting on the slope, sobbing his fool head off like a damned kid! The funny part of it was that he was soon not ashamed. What if the crack manhunter of the Idaho State Constabulary did bust right down an' bawl a little now an' then? Hell, ever'body was doin' it! Even the pretty girl with the dark hair was crying like her heart was broken when she once came up the hill with an unconscious child in her arms.

SOMEWHERE in all that hopeless work Green saw the Santa Fé Kid dragging the dead engineer up the slope, and Green cursed the Kid for wasting time. But the Kid struggled right on, dumbly. Goin' to get there with the load or bust a gut!

"Thirty-six of us got on!" It seemed hours before that fool looking for his wife was going heat-crazy again. "Lyd! Lyd! Where the hell are you—*Lydia! Why the hell don't you answer me?*"

"Yore wife's dead, Wash!" Somebody was just mean enough to yell that. "That cowpuncher fella drug 'er up the slope a long time ago!"

"You're a liar! There can't be nothing happened to her! My Lyd's all right. Lyd! *Lyd!*"

"Better catch the crazy jackass!" that snarling voice came. "He's loco as a cocked hat. Don't hit 'im, anybody. That's Wash Webb. He's been stone-blind for twenty years, pore devil!"

"Turn me loose!" The blind man was trying to fight somebody who had jerked him off his feet and was dragging him up the slope. "I'll kill you! I'll kill you both!"

It was the Kid. Green saw him and swore. He was like some fool persistent ant about to drag something up to the mine. The dark-haired girl was trying

to help him. She was pleading with the blind man, begging him to stop fighting.

"I want my Lyd!" he was sobbing. "I want my Lydia! Lyd, where the hell are you?"

Crazy, that was what! Any man was a fool who did not look out for himself. Let 'em die, let 'em all go to hell! Green was babbling his thoughts to all who wanted to listen, and then looked down and saw that he, himself, was dragging another unconscious man up the hill. This time it happened to be the conductor of the train—a great big devil who should have had the seat of his pants kicked off for eatin' so damn' much! Worse'n carryin' a dead Missouri mule up to the barn roof!

"Wonder why they'd do that, anyhow?" he growled. "Be better to bury 'im in a stable." A wild outburst of laughter shook him, and then he was a maniac. "Look at the mule I got! He'p me get 'im on the roof! Wet yore whistles an' draw up a chair—dammit, we'll have hot mule meat for supper when the barn burns down!"

The heat, the man-killing work and the drain on his nerves in such excitement was more than any ordinary human being could stand. He raved on, until somebody threw water on him when he got inside the mine with the dead-limp conductor. That cooled his burning old head a little, and the next thing he knew he was back on the slope, reeling around as if celebrating all the highlights of a full week's drunk.

He was laughing like a cackling old hen when a sudden attack of dizziness swept over him and he pitched head-first down the slope in the heat and dust. It was like reaching up and shooting one's brains out, to go dropping off into eternal darkness. Yes, sir, just as damn' easy as that!

WOOD was burning nearby when he came back to his senses. As he opened his eyes the sky was pitch-black overhead and the world was pitch-black all around, except for a faltering glow just to his left that was

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giving about as much light as a lard oil-lamp on a coal miner's head. He attempted to move and found that he was not able to wiggle a muscle down there, not able to feel a thing.

It was like having one's head cut off, the body thrown away, and the old brain still carrying on, clear as a bell. Maybe it was death, and yet he could roll his eyeballs and still turn his head a mite this way and that. He heard the blind man break loose again somewhere up there on the slope—still crazy as all hell about that wife of his. Why didn't somebody take 'im to her body?

"Lyd! Lyd!" the call was blaring. "Why don't you answer me?"

Green heard somebody come, and then they stumbled away as if they were fighting up there. Green forgot about him right after that. He turned his head a little and saw that it was one of the boxcars burning. Soon the fire would be getting to him, because he was lying right at the end of the car, and the flames were no more than ten feet away.

He tried to move again, and seemed to have forgotten how to make his muscles behave. He had had a nasty bump up there somewhere. Seemed like he remembered smashing hard on his tail-bone as he was pitching down the slope. Even a little bump like that could sometimes make a man hopelessly paralyzed for life.

Why the hell didn't somebody up there think about old Bilbo Green? The best Idaho lawman that ever shot a gun was lying down here alone—and nobody was giving a damn! It would be a nice trick for the Santa Fé Kid to forget all about him. Hell, he might even turn others back if they wanted to come down to look for him! Still, a man couldn't blame the Kid for that. Nope, it'd be the one good way out for the Kid, pretty as that dark-haired girl was up there. Somebody said she was a nurse.

Black wings startled him a moment later. Surely this was death, for no feathered creature that ever flew the Continental Divide could be as big as this. The firelight seemed to broaden out, letting the wings come down, a hundred feet wide and thicker than a house as far as a man could see.

He could not see the tips then. Thick as those wings were, those tips had to be 'way on out yonder. They settled over him, blotted out the light, and then started swinging up. And he knew that it was smoke, so thick and black a man could not see his nose until the burning glow of the boxcar came filtering back.

Not long after that he heard gravel rolling, and somebody groaned to his right. He turned his head that way, watching. From out of the blackness and into the glow a face finally appeared, drawn and hard, streaked with smoke and dust that had turned to mud in the incessant rain of perspiration dropping down. Two blue eyes seemed to push their way into the light, and the Santa Fé Kid was soon at the old man's side.

"You damned old fool!" he was half sobbing. "Why the hell didn't you stay where you were? I saw you pitch off that rim."

Green glowered at him, feeling his importance coming back. "If ary damned fool ever lived it's you! Yuh oughta stayed up there with that purty girl. Somethin' tells me she's goin' to feel right bad when I take yuh back to Clearwater."

"Shut up!" snarled the Kid. "And come on. We've got to get out of this. What's the matter? Can't you help yourself even a damned bit?"

"Can't even wiggle a toe, Kid."

"If you can talk by God, you can walk!"

Green tried to grin at him. "Second childhood, comin' back, maybe. Ma said I talked before I could crawl. I musta hit a bump up there or somethin'."

The Kid came closer, still wearing that rifle for a peg. Green heard him gritting his teeth when he picked him up and turned to attack the steep pitch of the slope. It was like murdering a man, having to be carried like this. The Kid fell three times before he reached the railroad tracks. Once he lay there beside Green, trembling and jerking as if chills were shaking him to the bone. Green moaned from the sheer agony of watching him suffer.

"Only a damn fool would do this for any man!" His voice shook. "If yuh had the sense of a louse, yuh son-of-a—"

"Don't finish it, Green!" The Kid swung up, and slapped him flat across the

mouth. "You don't talk to a Texan like that!"

"Sorry, Kid." The old man tried to smile. The slap had been so hard he could feel something like a bubble racing down his numb spine. "I had no call to say it. Hell, I used to have a sister in Texas, myself. Down in Pecos, she lived. Laurel Lane, her name was. Right purty, wasn't it? Sounded plumb flowery!"

He seemed to drift off after that. But the Kid was taking him on—the ant dragging in its chunk. They got across the tracks. Then through the oven like heat, something came down and struck the old man. It landed flat on his forehead, hot as fire, and splashed down his face. It was water from somewhere—maybe from the sky and driving earthward through the heat.

Lightning crashed a few moments later, but it was not like lightning at all. It was like a case of dynamite going off up there on the hill above the mine. A man could not see what was happening for the pitch-black smoke covering everything, but fire soon came raining down. It was flying all around when the Kid got to the mouth of the mine where men were working desperately to cover the mouth of the slope with boards torn from nearby shacks.

When they got inside, Green could feel the cold air on his face. Somebody was helping the Kid now, and Green was eased down with his back to the rib of the slope.

Several lanterns from the caboose were lighting the mine, and people were scattered on and on down there. The horses were still beyond them, quiet and asleep on their feet. Here and there a woman or a child was crying softly. Green heard the blind man again, still carrying on.

"Why didn't you stay by my side? You were my poor damned blind eyes, my body, my soul!"

THE dark-haired girl came from somewhere to dab oil on Green's face and hands. Tasted like lard when a little of it got in his mouth. The

PICTURE OF A GRADE-A CITIZEN!

¶ Meet the kind of man who believes that any other nation and race is fit only for slavery!

¶ Meet the kind of man who believes only the rule of blood and destruction; who believes that decency, honesty and kindness are "decadent," weak, and foolish.

¶ Meet the kind of man who never asks, but *takes*—at gun-point!

¶ Meet him—with bombs, with bullets, with tanks, fighting planes, and ships!

BUY WAR BONDS TODAY!

girl, he guessed, had got it from the caboose.

"Thanky, ma'am," he grunted when the girl turned away. She was going to the Santa Fé Kid and he knew it. A man and woman had helped the Kid down on his back a few yards away, and he was lying there like death as the man squatted beside him and carefully started taking that rifle from his leg.

The mine mouth had been covered with old planks by this time. Water was being brought up from below in the fire buckets just in case the planks took a notion to start burning. Green watched in silence, lying there listening to the noise below, a groan here, a low burst of sobbing there. The blind man was the worst. Sometimes his voice filled the mine.

It would maybe be like this some day when these same folks died and got Up Yonder. Old St. Peter would be sure to be mad at some of them. He'd give 'em the left hand signal, and maybe they'd come stumbling down a road like this, and he wondered what Old St. Pete would say to him. Might not have a place at all for a two-handed pistol-slick from the I. S. C. Might even say, "Go on, shuffle for yourself. We don't need no gunman up here—an' they don't want any down in Hell, neither!"

"Seven dead, eleven wounded," intoned a voice down the slope. "It's hell, ain't it, folks?"

Somebody laughed a wild, hysterical splatter of noise. "Seven-eleven—sounds like shootin' dice!"

Another man swore, two men started arguing heatedly, but Green paid no mind to it. That little bubble of feeling had come back, the same one that had gone down his numb spine when the Kid slapped him. It was no larger than the head of a small pin—a tiny, shooting something going down his back. It seemed to explode when it reached the end of the spine, and then it was gone, leaving him dead from the neck downward again.

He dozed off to sleep, waiting for the bubble to come back. It came while he was asleep, and when his eyes popped open again he could feel something like needles and pins gouging him.

He looked up. Men were throwing water on the planks above him. The Kid was still lying there, the girl sitting beside him, holding a little cup filled with water to his lips. Green spoke, just to let somebody know the best damned man-trailer in Idaho was still around, alive and feeling like he was soon going to be able to be on his feet again.

"Yuh all right, Kid?"

"Don't talk to him, please!" The girl answered for the Kid. "He's in great pain."

"If yo'll go down the slope," Green's voice was a growl, "an' look in the saddle pockets on that bay hoss yo'll find a bottle of headache pills. Maybe they'll help."

She was gone with the lantern a few minutes later. After that everybody seemed to be getting a pill or two as the girl stopped here and there, trying to help all the wounded. Green scowled when he saw her go back to the Kid.

Wimmin would take to him!

* * *

AROUND midnight everybody started yelling their heads off. Green had been asleep again, and it was startling when he awoke. For a few seconds he could not make head nor tail of it, then words broke through the wildly reverberating noise:

"Rain!"

"It's pourin'!"

"The sky's lettin' down!"

A man could soon hear it, hammering like forty drunken trapdrummers up there on the planks. Men kept yelling, women wept. In the excitement Green discovered that he could move his feet, then his legs. His whole body started tingling after that as if tiny bells were ringing in his every vein. It was like a foot that had gone to sleep and was coming slowly back to life. In a short time he discovered that he could raise himself a little higher against the rib of the slope.

"Yuh all right, Kid?"

"Yes!" The Kid answered him this time. "Thanks for the pills."

"Don't mention 'em." Green grinned wickedly. "The State gives 'em to me, free."

The drum of rain grew heavier. It

was soon like a cloudburst spreading over all creation. Water was racing down the slopes and spilling on in great floods down to the river. At the end of another hour somebody said the air was getting cooler out there and the fire seemed to be dying down a little on the distant hills.

When daylight came the whole world was steaming outside. The rain was still pouring. It was like that all day, and all the night that followed—a raging battle between fire and water as if the sky had grown as mad as the devil at last, and was showing a confounded inferno what it could do when it really let loose.

"God's fightin' 'er down." Some old woman kept saying as she tried to sing hymns in her cracked voice. "He's showin' that durned fire what He can do!"

The rain had won when daylight came again. Men went outside to look around. Green was able by this time to get up and go out with them, but he was still stumbling. Someone seized his arm, and he saw that it was the conductor he had dragged up the slope.

All the world looked wet and slopping now. The river below was far out of its banks, an inky flood filled with ashes, logs and other bits of charred wreckage left by the fire.

"Listen!" The conductor suddenly threw up his hand. "Do you hear it?"

It was as faint as the strum of a breeze on a banjo string. A man had to hold his breath and strain his ears to hear it, it was such a mere whisper from the west through the sticky-damp gloom. Everybody stood there listening, waiting for it to come again, and when it came a shout went up.

It was still faint, still far, far away, but everyone knew the full meaning of it. A locomotive was creeping up the grades and slow-winding around the curves, carrying bridge-gangs and track-men and first-aid equipment.

"They should push through by nightfall." The conductor was bawling like a baby, and the danged fool was not even ashamed of it. "They'll have hospital cars, doctors, nurses and grub! They'll get through if they have to wade through hell on bloody stumps!"

"Yeah—yeah, I 'spect so," intoned Green, feeling like he was trying to swallow a frog. "They ain't goin' to let us down."

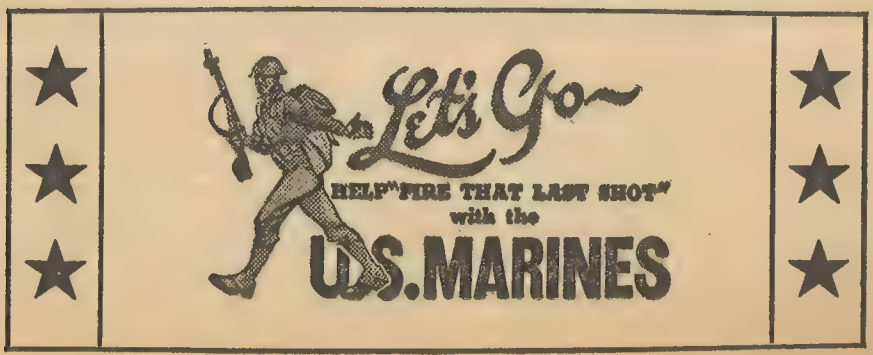
He turned and went stumbling back into the mine, where he found the Kid alone for the moment.

"I fail my job just once, Kid," he muttered. "I—I ain't takin' yuh back to Clearwater. That train will take yuh back to Spokane, Washington, or on over to Montana somewhere. Yo're ridin' it. I'll go down to Boise an' tell my own little tale to the governor. He's a man who'll listen to me, an' I'll see that yore slate gets a clean wash-out. Jules DeVeree wasn't nothin' but a tinhorn hawg!"

"Thanks." One clear-cut smile moved the Kid's lips. He had just time enough to finish what he wanted to say before the dark-haired girl came hurrying back up the slope to him.

"I really came up in this country to see you, but never got around to it. You spoke of Laurel Lane when I was dragging you up the slope. My first name's Jesse, and just in case you'd like to know, Laurel Lane was my mother!"

THE END



By BART CASSIDY

"Nice thing," I say, bitter. "You had me glassed. . . ."

Tensleep's Ghost Mesa Invasion

The night that Tensleep Maxon rode hard toward the sanctuary he hoped to find on Ghost Mesa, he didn't know that the blood of two murdered men was on his reckless head—or that already waiting at the end of his fugitive trail was the toughest manhunter in all that lawless frontier.

FRIENDSHIP is a fine thing, but not to be too lightly taken, as the feller said. Yep, there ain't nothin' better than a friend, but first find out if he's got the choppin' block ready an' the axe ground. If I'd bin anybody but the trustin' soul I am, I might uh tumbled to the brand uh friendship Frenchy Cadonau offered me, there at the Monument Saloon in Monolith City.

First, not knowin' a human in the place, I'm drinkin' alone—a belly-ace to Missus Maxon's little boy Tensleep anyplace on the face of the clock—when up steps the dark, slender, handsome jigger with the fancy duds, the tiny waxed mustache an' black gimlet eyes full of the milk of human kindness.

"I'm lonesome as the devil," he says wistful, "and I'll bet you ain't far different yourself. I'm Frenchy Cadonau and gamblin's my profession. Could I interest you in drinkin' with me, Mister. . . ?"

"Jones," I grin, right happy he's chose me. "Jackpot Jones. I'm the gamblin' member of the Wyoming Joneses." We shake hands fervent an' down a whiskey neat. "Now I'll be pleased if you'll have one on me, Mister Cadonau."

That's the way it goes for a spell, until it's Jackpot an' Frenchy, an' we try a bit of a song together. But that don't go so good, me bein' sort of a caved-in baritone an' him bein' a washed-out tenor. The result is a cross betwixt a coyote howl an' the hoot of an Arizona dry-land frog. It dies a-bornin' when the bartender grabs up a bungstarter an' threatens to end the discord even if it means a new layer of sawdust. I mention this only to show me an' Frenchy understand one another even if nobody else appreciates us.

Somewhere around the tenth round, Frenchy spies a game languishin' in a corner, with two empty chairs fair cryin' out for gamblin' men. "Them seats is for us, Jackpot," he beams. "An if we'd chose 'em that way ourselves, we couldn't have placed 'em better. You savvy the old whipsaw?" An' when I nod: "Good. You an' me, pardner. An' we'll split the winnin's after the game. Come on."

An' I'm just full enough of happy water to take him up on a razzle-dazzle like that. Well, him and me play it like we'd bin teamed for years. Against us is two cowmen, the houseman an' the town medico who's too drunk to matter. The way we pry under the hides of them stud-horse addicts is cruel.

One of them cowmen has a suspicious nature. He gits on his ear, mutterin' an' grumblin', an' it's plain he's plenty proud of his game. Every now an' then I ketch him watchin' me careful, especially when I take secret peeks at my hole card. Then, after I'd won two straight pots an' Frenchy the three before that, this ugly tempered cow-character bounces to his feet an' levels a condemnin' finger at me.

"I seen you do it!" he shrieks. "You palmed yore hole pip an' run in a sleeve card. Yo're nothin' but a—"

"You're a liar!" I blat, an' kick back my chair.

"An' you're a dead man," he rages, an' goes fer his gun.

Natural, I ain't expectin' no such raw meat business an' I'm caught short. Ain't neither of us bustin' no records gittin' our cutters shook loose, but I'm plenty behind an' due fer a leadin'-up, us bein' so close a miss is a long odds bet, when my new pardner makes a awkward pass at backin' away from there an' jiggles the ranicky cowman's elbow, makin' him miss.

Promptly I plug the gent through his gun arm an' he falls to the floor, howlin' like I'd killed him.

Well, there's a lot of excitement an' confusion. The bartender covers me with a scattergun, claimin' I'd ruined a good patron an' brung disrepute upon a nice decent saloon. The houseman claims that as long as I was cheatin', the house confiscates my chips. An' when Frenchy Cadonau protests, the bouncer lands astraddle of him an' punches him in the eye.

Frenchy pulls a derringer an' somebody kicks him in the teeth. He goes out like Aunt Lizzie's glass eye. An' a good time is had by all present. Then, as they have it in plays, comes the law.

Sheriff John Parkplanter, decryin' this relapse of a place he has punished before for rowdyism, as he puts it, an' that promised faithful to reform. He pinches me an' the cowman, Frenchy an' the bouncer an' a couple of other fellers, includin' the drunk doctor. Whee-ew!

Well, the cowman's so bad hurt he's taken out of jail to go to bed. The doctor gits out to attend him. The case against the bouncer an' a couple of bystanders is dismissed fer lack of evidence. The judge throws the book at me, passin' out a sixty day sentence an' a sixty dollar fine. Which cools me off for a good four months, at the usual jail rate of a dollar a day. Frenchy gets ten days or ten dollars, which he pays. After that I'm holdin' down that hot,

stuffy jailhouse all by my lonesome—a bleak prospect with four months of it starin' me in the face.

That first ten days is the longest I've ever spent. I don't see nobody in all that time except an occasional glimpse of the sheriff an' a three-times-a-day visit from the restaurant Chink. Every wakin' hour I'm worryin' that the sheriff may someday tumble to the fact he's holdin' Tensleep Maxon, worth a thousand dollars on the hoof, instead of Jackpot Jones, a driftin' tinhorn. But mostly I'm sore at my new-found friend—Frenchy Cadonau. Fine friend he's turned out to be! Hasn't even been around to bust up the long, draggin' days.

I've got ten of them hundred an' twenty days scratched onto the cell wall when I hear Frenchy's voice outside. Sheriff lets him into the corridor an' shuts the door, leavin' me an' the gamblin' man lookin' at one another, with the bars between.

"Sorry," he says, "that I ain't bin able to do anything for you, Jackpot. But I had to sue the Monument Saloon for my winnin's, which they glaumed when I was dragged off to jail."

"Sue a saloon," I exclaim. "Never heard of such a thing. How'd you come out?"

He grins. "Hadn't a leg to stand on, Jackpot. Not even a man who'd testify I had the chips won. So I ride over to Desert Junction an' get a shyster I know over there. He knows all the angles an' was born with a gift for logic an' the art of convincing speech. I sicced him onto the Monument Saloon an' they settled out of court."

"Have him go after mine," I suggest.

"He had to get back," he says rueful. "An' besides, the owner of the Monument claims you forfeited yours by bringing trouble to the place. Forget that. I've got plans that will bring you big mazuma." He glances right and left, drops his voice. "How would you like to get out of here?"

"Slip me a sharp file, feller," I answer, fervent, "an' watch my smoke. It would take up the time slack, even if it didn't work."

"I got a better idea," he whispers. "But there's plenty risk involved an' I'm not keen to take it unless I can depend on you."

"Depend on me, eh? Such as how?"

"I AIN'T down here just by chance," he confesses, "but to get back something that was took from me in a mean, thievin' an' underhand way. Property, you understand. Land, a fine spring an' the kind of a range cow-minded folks dream about. If I could depend on you helpin' me oust the old devil that's moved in on my rights, I'd spring you outa here, pay you a better wage than you've ever made an' give you an interest in the outfit."

"Sounds good," I enthuse. "I'm your oyster."

"Even if it means a killin'?"

In my mind as I make that decision is a rock-jawed, land-thievin' devil that would kick a crutch out from under a cripple. That, an' them hundred an' ten days yet to rot in the jail. "I ain't too squeamish," I tell him.

"Good boy!" he beams, an' shakes my hand between bars. "I knew the minute I saw you that you was my man. Now you hang an' rattle in here till you hear from me. We gotta work this smooth an' easy, where the law will be all on the side of our enemies, regardless of right an' wrong."

He leaves me mighty excited an' none at all worried about what him an' me might have to do to some loused-up land-grabber later on. I all but hold my breath all that night an' the next day. Nothin' happens an' I'm nervous as a chipmunk an' damnin' Frenchy in Sioux, Shoshone, Mex an' plain United States.

Another day goes by an' I give up all hope. Something has shorely happened to Cadonau or he'd have done somethin' before now. That evenin', Sheriff John Parkplanter fetches my supper in person, opens the cell an' sets on the cot while I'm eatin'. He's a weasel-faced little feller with a sad droop to the lips an' worried eyes.

"Jones," he says, after a bit, "how long you knowed this Frenchy Cadonau?"

I drain my coffee cup an' lay the tray down. "Without the benefit of legal counsel," I crack, smart, "I stand on my rights an' refuse to answer."

"Rights, shorely," he growls, "but not

what I'd call wisdom. Did you ever hear of Black Jack Duran?"

"The train robber?" I stare at him, flabbergasted. "Sure I have. But you're not tryin' to insinuate that Frenchy an' Black Jack are . . . ho, ho, ho, that's the hottest one I've heard in a long time, Sheriff!"

He flushes under my ridicule. "I admit it sounds a little far fetched," he says. "But you know that Frenchy feller tallies up to every item of Black Jack's description. Believe me, I'm goin' to give that feller a chance to deny it—if I can find him here or hereabouts. He's turned up missin'. Wouldn't have no idear where he's at?"

"None at all, Sheriff," I say, honest. "Wisht I did."

He grunts, gives me a suspicious look an' goes out with the tray. Along about dark, he comes back to his office, his light strikin' under the corridor door an' also the rustle of papers. Dollars to doughnuts, he's runnin' down all the records on Black Jack Duran.

It always strikes me funny how ambitious a bounty-hunter will get when there's the smell of a hide to be stretched.

After while I begin to get sleepy an' I'm thinkin' some of pullin' off my duds an' crawlin' into the feathers when there's a knock on the sheriff's outside door. At Parkplanter's "Come in", I hear the hinges squeal an' a voice.

"Howdy, Sheriff. They tell me over at the Monument that you're lookin' for me. What's up?"

It's Frenchy!

"Set down," gruffs the lawman. "Wanted to ask you a few questions, Cadonau. But since startin' to look you up, I've got all the answers. Yo're Duran. . . . Don't make a move, feller, or I'll kill yuh! Get them paws up around yore ears. Cross yore wrists an' turn yore back. Now. . . ."

After that, there's some rustlin' around in the sheriff's office, but not another word spoke loud enough for me to hear. Presently I hear the door close softly an' all the hope I've had of cheatin' a jail sentence goes glimmerin'. Frenchy's headed for the rope instead of a jailbreak, for there was a trainman killed in the Roaring River train hold-up. I'm pullin' off my boots a few minutes later, when there's a *ps-s-s-st!* at the barred winder. "Jackpot!"

Cripes, it's Frenchy. Am I goin' squirrelly? "How in the aitch did you git loose?" I blat, dartin' to the winder.

"Never mind that," he whispers. "An' shut up if you still hone to be sprung." He passes a big key through the bars.

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If you're feeling out o'sorts, Get Up Nights or suffer from Burning Passages, Backache, Swollen Ankles, Nervousness, Rheumatic Pains, Dizziness, Circles Under Eyes and feel worn-out, the cause may be non-organic and non-systemic Kidney and Bladder troubles.

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Cystex

"Let yoreself out an' take the alley to the feed barn. I'll meet you there. Make it quick."

He's gone an' I'm jerkin' on my boots with tremblin' fingers. Heart hammerin', I put the key into the lock. It fits . . . an' I'm loose!

I pour through the corridor door into the sheriff's office. An' there I skid to a halt. The light's out, but the rays of the moon are strikin' through the winder an' onto the face of Sheriff John Parkplanter on the floor. He's layin' on his back with a knife stickin', hilt deep, in his throat—one of them throwin' knives that's carried in a sheath between the shoulder blades! Holy cow!

I look around for his gun, but don't find it. An' I don't dare take time to hunt through the desk for mine 'cause I can hear bootsteps poundin' down the walk to'rds the jail. I pop out the door, freeze there in bright moonlight. I can't make a move without the pair movin' along the walk seein' me. Fact is, they see me now.

"That you, John?"

I leap off the steps and duck around the corner of the jail. I hear one of them two holler: "What the hell's this?" an' hear 'em runnin'. I circle the jailhouse an' hit the walk again just as they're bargin' into the jail.

The one behind says: "There he goes, Mack. Hoppin' across the street."

"Keep an eye on him," the one called Mack hollers, "while I see what goes on here."

I swish across the street, duck between two buildin's an' hit the alley on the high lope, thankin' my stars that them two suspicious gents didn't unlimber their artillery just on general principles. An' I've hardly got them thanks uttered, when them two at the jail is fillin' the town with their caterwaulin'.

"Prisoner loose! Sheriff's murdered an' the jail's empty!"

Cripes! That town erupts like a volcano, everybody pourin' outside an' yellin' to high Heaven. Somebody yells to guard the stable an' watch all horses. An' I'm bustin' a gut runnin'. I wheel into the stable, prayin' Frenchy Cadonau's got the ponies saddled, an' that they're good 'uns. He's waitin' for me in the middle of the barn, with a leggy black horse rigged.

"What the hell you bin doin'?" he barks nasty. "You've got the whole town down on us now. Here, whip this around you." He hands me a loaded gunbelt an' boosts me into the saddle while I'm bucklin' it on.

"Straight west about ten mile," he rattles on. "Cross the Carbon Crick bridge an' turn south across the hills. Trail will lead you down to the desert. Out there you'll see the long, flat line of Ghost Mesa. Ride to it an' go up—you'll find a trail. I'll meet you there soon as it's seemly to leave this excitement. May have to ride on the posse. Ghost Mesa is mine. Knock over any trespasser you find on my property. Good luck."

"Looks like the least you could do would be to ride there with me," I grouse. "If they ketch me now, they'll string me up for killin' Parkplanter."

"Right!" he barks. "What you waitin' for," He jerks my pony to face the front, slaps it right smart. "By way of the street," he says. "Yell for 'em to foller you. Tell 'em you're hot on the heels of the killer."

My pony leaps. I hit the street, blast a couple shots westward an' holler: "Fork yore saddles, you turtles. Can't you see he's gettin' away. After him!"

It wakes a high yell of excitement. But that it don't fool some of them townsmen is proved by a roarin' gunblast an' bullets streakin' past me an' the fuzztail. Too damned close for comfort.

After a quarter mile, I feel safe to straighten in the stirrups an' help the pony to all the speed it's got. We claw back them first ten miles pronto an' thunder across the corduroy bridge over Carbon Crick with the echoes of fast pursuit gettin' no weaker. But the rabbit I'm forkin' is a hill-climbin' fool an' we draw away the minute the trail slants up. After another hour, we're on top of the main ridge, in heavy cedars, an' the sounds are gone from the backtrail. An' so's my pony, purt' near.

After that, I let him take it a heap easier an' keep my fingers crossed as we drop out of the high hills an' onto the flat, sandy, cactus-thorned stretch of the Arenoso Desert, beautiful as a siren in the moonlight, an' twice as deadly. Yonder, lookin' in the moon-fog like a low ta-

ble set with a circlin' of stools, looms Ghost Mesa. It's a long ways off an' the suspicion hits me that Frenchy's trickin' me. One thing sure; I'll never get back alive if there ain't water on that mesa. An' why should there be any water up there?

But inside me is a hauntin' fear, to be plumb frank. I just don't dare to foller my yen to branch off along the hills an' hit for far pastures. If I'm caught, the way things is left back in Monolith City, I'll hang sure as shootin'. My fear of the mesa is by far the easiest to live with.

DAWN catches me still five mile short of Ghost Mesa, nursin' a mighty tired pony an' trying desperate to see what's behind me, an' failin' to pick up a thing. Come sun-up, I search the cliffs of the mesa for a way up. There don't seem to be none. An', neither is there anything hospitable on the mesa, from this worm's-eye view.

I circle the tableland for two-three mile before I find a way up—a tilted hard-rock shelf. It takes me to the top, where I look down on an unbelievable sight.

"Hands up, Mister! An' lively, if you don't want yore head blowed off."

Whee-ew! I throw my shoulders out, elevatin'. An' cuss myself for a fool in doubtin' Frenchy. I swivel around to look into a gun barrel, backed up by a stringy man with iron-gray whiskers, bushy black eyebrows an' eyes like twin shotgun barrels.

In his left hand is a telescope. "Nice thing," I mutter. "You had me glassed."

"All the way," he admits, dehornin' me.

"Didn't notice anybody tailin' me, did yuh?"

He shakes his head. "So yo're on the dodge. Ease off the arms an' explain."

"It's a long story," I grin, wan. "You want it with or without map?"

"Forget it," he gruffs. "I'm plumb interested why yo're here without canteen or food. Yore saddle's built for a bigger man, which means the horse was likely stole. You'll bear a heap uh watchin'. Start down the trail, slow an' easy."

Under the gun, I break down into a sunken meadowland, stirrup deep in grass. Fat stock are grazin' along a willow-lined streamway. Cabins of stone, nestlin' at the far end, complete a drifter's dream come true. No wonder Frenchy's painted up for the gent that's jumped it. The old man locks me in an unused rock shanty. "Got more watchin' to do," he says, "before we eat. I don't want you strayin' while I'm busy."

Come midafternoon, he unlocks an' sets me down to a nice cooked meal. "Shucks," he beams. "I can't cook a lick alongside my daughter. She an' her man—they own this layout—are down fer mail an' groceries. Back tonight, likely."

"So they're the ones that jumped the claim?" I blurt, an' coulda bit off my tongue. He starts, bends a black look onto me.

"Neighbor," he glooms, an' I interrupt to tell him I'm Jackpot Jones. "Jones, the way you rode here, I knowed somebody'd told you about Ghost Mesa. Ain't many knows about it an' only one about this claim bein' jumped. Interested, eh? Well, it ain't nobody else than Black Jack Duran, the outlaw an' renegade who built the cabin I had you locked in. He homesteaded here under an alias, expectin' to prove up by absent treatment. When we challenged, he sent a shyster over from Desert Junction with script. The gov'ment found for us, but even if they hadn't I'd still have staked out here waitin' for him to return." He must of read my eyes, 'cause he flushes. "No, not bounty. Personal reasons. I'm Jeff Lomax, once sheriff of Monument County. I was tipped off the night Black Jack an' his gang held up the C. U. & W., but they crossed me by stoppin' the train at Roaring River instead of Black Horse Grade. As it was, Black Jack put six bullets into me an' got off with fifty thousand folding dollars."

"An' then?" I prompt, flabbergasted that I'm lookin' at the great Jeff Lomax.

"Once I get up, I cold trail him here. I would uh nabbed him if my weak legs hadn't buckled. That was three years ago, an' Black Jack ain't bin back. Nor that currency ain't in circulation. It's buried here. Howcome he trusted you to fetch it?"

"Wrong guess," I grin. "I was supposed to send you packin'." I tell him all that's happened to me in Monument Coun-

ty. "I was jailed tight when Parkplanter died," I tell him. "An' never could throw a knife, never owned one. Still I had to run."

"Sure," he nods. "With that devil laughin' that he had you hipped. He'll not let anything stand in his way." He broods, an' I'm ashamed I thought of him badly.

"If you'll trust me," I say, humble, "I'll do what I can to. . . ."

"Whoa up," he barks. "I can't afford to trust you if I would. Too much at stake. Now, if you've et, le's get back. I want you where I won't have to worry."

He locks me up, an' I'm cussin' him for a stubborn old fool that may know Black

Frenchy Cadonau

Jack but who sure as hell underestimates him. Sunset, an' no Lomax. Night brings me a healthy hunger an', a full hour later, my jailer. He jingles me up to the house, where a man an' a gal are settin' at table, waitin' for us.

The man is plainly a lunger an' likely the reason they own the claim. The gal, she's a Lomax, with Ol' John's brave eyes an' nervous movements. An' she's mighty pretty.

"We're waiting for you," she says, eyeing me with interest. " 'Tain't every day we get to eat with a double murderer."

"Double?" Surely she's hoorawing me. "They hung another on me now?"

"Sheriff Parkplanter, when you broke jail," she says, "and Billy Weller, the stable hostler, when you stole a horse for your getaway. Both knife murders. . . . *Ugh!*" She shivers a little. "You don't look that bloodthirsty."

"I'm not," I tell her, obeyin' John Lomax' order to set. "I'm tender as a kitten, but with claws just as sharp when I'm crowded too close."

"I've told her all about it, Jones," says Lomax. "An' that gun she's wearin' ain't no brag. She's a flip-cock artist, fast as they come an' the equal of any man I ever seen."

"I wish this Black Jack Duran would show up soon," says the invalid, plaintive. "Sooner it's all over, one way or another, the better. I'm sick hearing' his name, of havin' my wife wearin' a gun all the time for fear of his comin'. It's hell, that's what it is."

"I have an idea you'll get yore wish," I tell him. "I expect him to show here most any ol' time, an' I'd admire most mortal to have a gun to face him with."

"The Lomax tribe will take care of him," says the ex-sheriff, stubborn. "This ain't your fight."

"I can see that," I grin. "Havin' two murders laid to me is just part of the day's work. I still want the chance to smoke it out with Black Jack. What can I do, ma'am, to convince yore dad he can trust me with the gun he taken off me?"

"Reach for the ceilin'!"

The answer comes not from the gal, but from behind my back.

I jump up, reachin' an' slantin' a look across my shoulder. The door is plumb full of Frenchy Cadonau, his dark face mocking us. He's got a gun in each hand an' in his black eyes is a dare to defy his drop.

"What a nice domestic little scene!" he grins. "This ain't the first time that a trusted messenger falls to the lure of a siren of the hills. You disappointed me, Tensleep Maxon. Now there's only the gather an' the pay-off." He takes three quick steps into the room, holsterin' his left-hand gun. "First, I'll take temptation outa your way!"

HE JERKS John Lomax's pistol, laughin' at the bitterness of the baffled old man who had waited years for this chance, only to muff it. He

throws the gun through a window pane, lifts the gal's pearl-handled pistol. His back is half turned to me an' I'm tempted to jump him. Only his proven deadliness holds me back, waitin' for a better chance.

There's a reek of whiskey about Frenchy an' he's quite jovial, in a blood-curdlin' sort of way. "Ain't this cozy?" he hums, favorin' Lomax' lunger son-in-law with a contemptuous glance. "Tensleep Maxon, a thousand dollar dead-or-alive killer who thought I fell for his Jackpot Jones stuff. I knowed him soon as I saw him—which is more'n certain sheriffs I could name. I'll collect on his carcass, once I've rubbed you trespassers out an' dug up my little rainy-day cache." He eyes John Lomax, fierce. "Better yet, I'll let you dig under the big boulder by the old cabin, John. If you do a good job, I may let you live till you finish it."

"No!" A sob shakes the gal. "Please. . . !"

"Don't beg nothin' of the dog," snaps ol' John. "Don't lower yourself, Rita."

Frenchy laughs. "No, honey," he says, soft. "You don't need to beg Black Jack for nothin'. Don't worry. I killed Park-planter because he insisted on jailin' me. I killed that fool kid because he wouldn't saddle me the fastest horse in the barn. An' now I gotta kill these three gents because they know too much. An' all for why? So that you an' me can get safely out of the country, with fifty thousand American dollars. We're giving a whirl to Buenos Aires—Rio—Mexico City. Travel, luxury—an' fun. You got nothin' to worry about, baby." He chucks her under the chin an' the lunger, who ain't spoke a word up till now, goes crazy.

"Take your bloody hands off her!" he shrieks, an' jerks a .22 pocket pistol out of his coat. Black Jack wheels to face him just in time to take that pellet of lead somewhere under the left arm. Properly placed, it could have finished him. But even as I hurl myself at him, I know this hasn't even maimed him. As he turns, Black Jack's between me an' his gun.

It's a close thing, but I hit him a fraction before he can swing to meet my charge. I knock him down, the gun-blast deafenin' me as the ball screams past my head. Then we're both down, me tryin' to hold his gun-hand away from me an'

"IS GOD DEAD?"

(as this war grows worse Americans are asking that question)

Well I can say to them that God is most certainly NOT dead for I TALKED WITH GOD, and as a result of that little talk with God a strange Power came into my life. After 42 years of horrible, dismal, sickening failure, everything took on a brighter hue. It's fascinating to talk with God, and it can be done very easily once you learn the secret. And when you do—well—there will come into your life the same dynamic Power which came into mine. The shackles of defeat which bound me for years went a-shimmering—and now—?—well, I own control of the largest daily newspaper in our County, I own the largest office building in our City, I drive a beautiful Cadillac limousine. I own my own home which has a lovely pipe-organ in it, and my family are abundantly provided for after I'm gone. And all this has been made possible because one day, ten years ago, I actually and literally talked with God.

You, too, may experience that strange mystical Power which comes from talking with God, and when you do, if there is poverty, unrest, unhappiness, or ill-health in your life, well—this same God-Power is able to do for you what it did for me. No matter how useless or helpless your life seems to be—all this can be changed. For this is not a human Power I'm talking about—it's a God-Power. And there can be no limitations to the God-Power, can there? Of course not. You probably would like to know how you, too, may talk with God, so that this same Power which brought me these good things might come into your life, too. Well—just write a letter or a postcard to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 105, Moscow, Idaho, and full particulars of this strange Teaching will be sent to you free of charge. But write now—while you are in the mood. It only costs one cent to find out, and this might easily be the most profitable one cent you have ever spent. It may sound unbelievable—but it's true, or I wouldn't tell you it was.—Advt. Copyright, 1942, Frank B. Robinson.

pound him unconscious at the same time. Try that on yore piany some time!

Black Jack's wiry as an eel an' strong as a cougar. I've sure got my hands full of fightin' wildcat. We roll across the floor, him blastin' two more shots just in the hope of tallyin' something unexpected. He tears his hand loose an' raps me over the skull with the gun-barrel. Red stars put out my sight an' stop up my hearin'. I'm like a gent floatin' around amongst the moon an' the stars an' the meteors. I seem to be fallin' an' clutch at the first thing at hand. Which happens to be Black Jack's neck.

My vision clears up an' I ketch a glimpse of John Lomax dancin' around, tryin' for a shot that won't hit me. Then a skirt flutters in between us an' a axe swishes past my head an' almost cuts Black Jack's left hand off. He lets out an unholy howl an' busts my holt on his neck, tossin' me aside an' risin'. He blasts a shot at Old John an' the old man goes down, roarin' mad that the slug has tunneled his gun arm.

I roll to my feet, an' I'm face to face with the lunger. He's standin' paralyzed, his jaw saggin' an' his .22 pistol danglin' from his fingers. I've got nothin' but contempt for so small a piece, but any old port in a storm, as the feller said. I spin around, just in time to see Lomax bounce off the floor. Black Jack is pullin' down for the finisher an' the gal is screamin' bloody murder.

"Frenchy!" I blat. "Look out!"

He wheels. The tag of his Bull Durham sack is hangin' out of his left shirt pocket. It's a good target. I let him have it. Once, twice, three times. He grunts like he's terrible surprised. He drops the gun an' slowly lifts his shattered left hand an' looks at it with regretful sadness.

He whispers an' the words that come through the silence, I'll swear are: *"It's murder!"*

Then he sprawls limp on the floor. An', strange, I don't see him lyin' there, not at first. 'Cause all I can see is the picture of the moon shinin' in on the cold, set face of Sheriff Parkplanter, with a knife hilt-deep in his throat.

Old John is settin' on the floor tryin' to knot a handkerchief around his hurt. The gal is kneelin' beside him, her hands wavin' like she's feelin' for something to do. Her eyes are on Black Jack, like she's scairt he'll come back to life an' start his reign of terror all over again. Her husband is gaspin' like a man that's oversprinted his strength.

Me, I'm the first one to really snap out of it. I shake off the spell, toss the .22 into a corner an' laugh, shaky.

"Clean livin' an' fightin' blood tells the tale, folks," I hooraw.

Old John gets up, his eyes filled with gratitude. "Thanks, son," he says, an' squeezes my hand with his good one. "Looks like I outrun my shadow. I ain't the man I once was. But thanks—"

He pauses, cockin' an ear to outdoors. Gallopin' horses—lots of 'em! A cold, commandin' voice: "Scatter out, boys. That shootin' probably means Jackpot Jones has lit here an' is gunnin' down John Lomax an' his family."

Cripes! Suddenly calm as a sunnin' lizard, John Lomax says: "Get into that bedroom, son. Mebbyso here's where I can square the account some. Hurry."

I ketch up Black Jack's fallen gun, an' I dart back into the darkened bedroom. He steps outside, hollerin': "Bad guess, boys. 'Tain't Jackpot Jones you want, but Black Jack Duran. He come here, braggin' he'd murdered Parkplanter an' a hostler back in Monolith. He was for killin' us an' diggin' up his cached train loot. . . . Only he's plumb dead."

The scatterin' horsemen converge on the door an' spurs are jinglin' as they light down. There's a chorus of questions an' answers, none of which I hear. I step out the window an' ghost through the darkness to'rds a pony that's nickerin' down the valley a piece. Black Jack's horse, no doubt.

It ain't that I don't trust ol' John Lomax, even if he has figgered out who I am. It's just that I've got an appointment with a horse, way up around Baggs City.

Good ol' Glory Hawss! His hoofs should be growed out an' he's likely fat an' frisky, on pasture, waitin' for me to make good my promise to come get him before snow flies. Yep, I gotta see a hawss about some further driftin'—the best damned hawss I've ever rode!

FRONTIERSMEN WHO MADE HISTORY

from the notebook of CEDRIC·W·WINDAS

THOMAS GALBRAITH

Although Thomas Galbraith's official title was that of Indian Agent at Yellow Medicine River, he took upon himself the task of keeping the peace, from the Upper Sioux Agency clear to Fort Ridgley, and that was a man-sized job indeed. The territory between these two points harbored not only the constantly warring rival tribes of Chippewa and Sioux, but also the toughest of white renegades who preyed on the honest paleface settlers in this district.

When Big Tim Berger (fearful that a hemp necktie would prematurely close his career as Minnesota's No.1 horse-thief), decided to follow the comparitively peaceful profession of "moonshine vendor to Injuns," he reckoned without Tom Galbraith. The Indian Agent killed Berger in a wild duel on the Reservation, and shipped Big Tim's body back to the Sheriff's office in one of the outlaw's own hogsheads as a warning to others of like ilk.

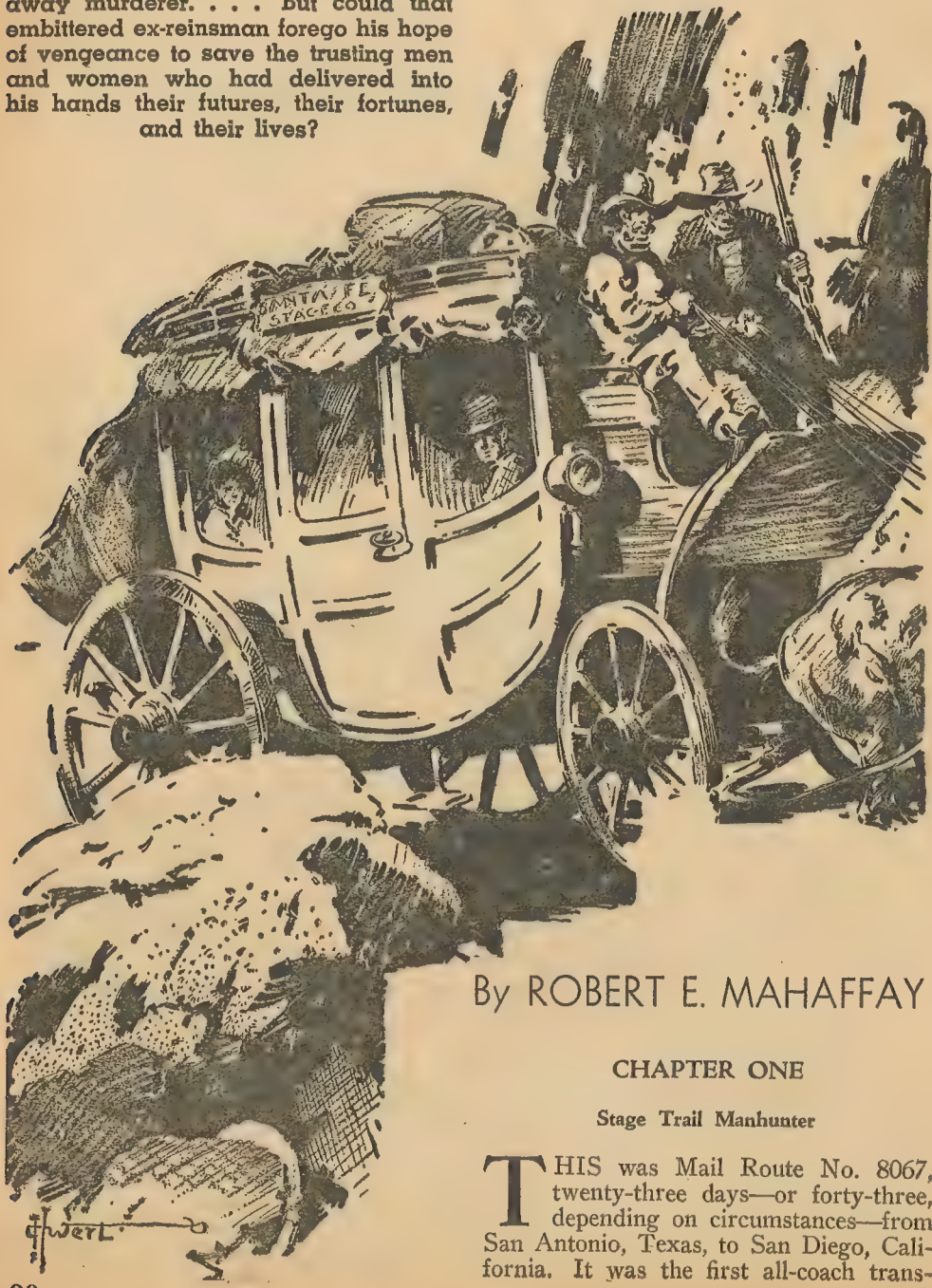
When the Chippewas killed two young Sioux fishermen, Galbraith saved the district from the horrors of a tribal war by going alone to the Chief of the Chippewas and demanding the punishment of the murderers, a demand which was carried out to the satisfaction of the Sioux.

Galbraith's next heroic act was fighting off an attack by outlaws who tried to rob the Agency of $71,000 Government Annuity money for the Indian tribes.

It was when Little Crow led his Sioux warriors to massacre the palefaces living along the Yellow Medicine that Galbraith proved invaluable to the soldiers sent to quell the uprising. He helped serve the guns at Fort Ridgley and was mentioned in despatches for bravery. His knowledge of Indian life and habits, their temperament and fighting tactics, was given full credit in the headquarter's reports of Brigadier General Sibley. Galbraith's name became synonomous among red men and white alike for justice and square dealing, and he was a great credit to the Brotherhood of Frontiersmen.

STAGE WEST!

Blacklisted on every stage trail from Sacramento to Phoenix, Martin Gage wanted only to kill the man whose lies had damned him as a cowardly runaway murderer. . . . But could that embittered ex-reinsman forego his hope of vengeance to save the trusting men and women who had delivered into his hands their futures, their fortunes, and their lives?



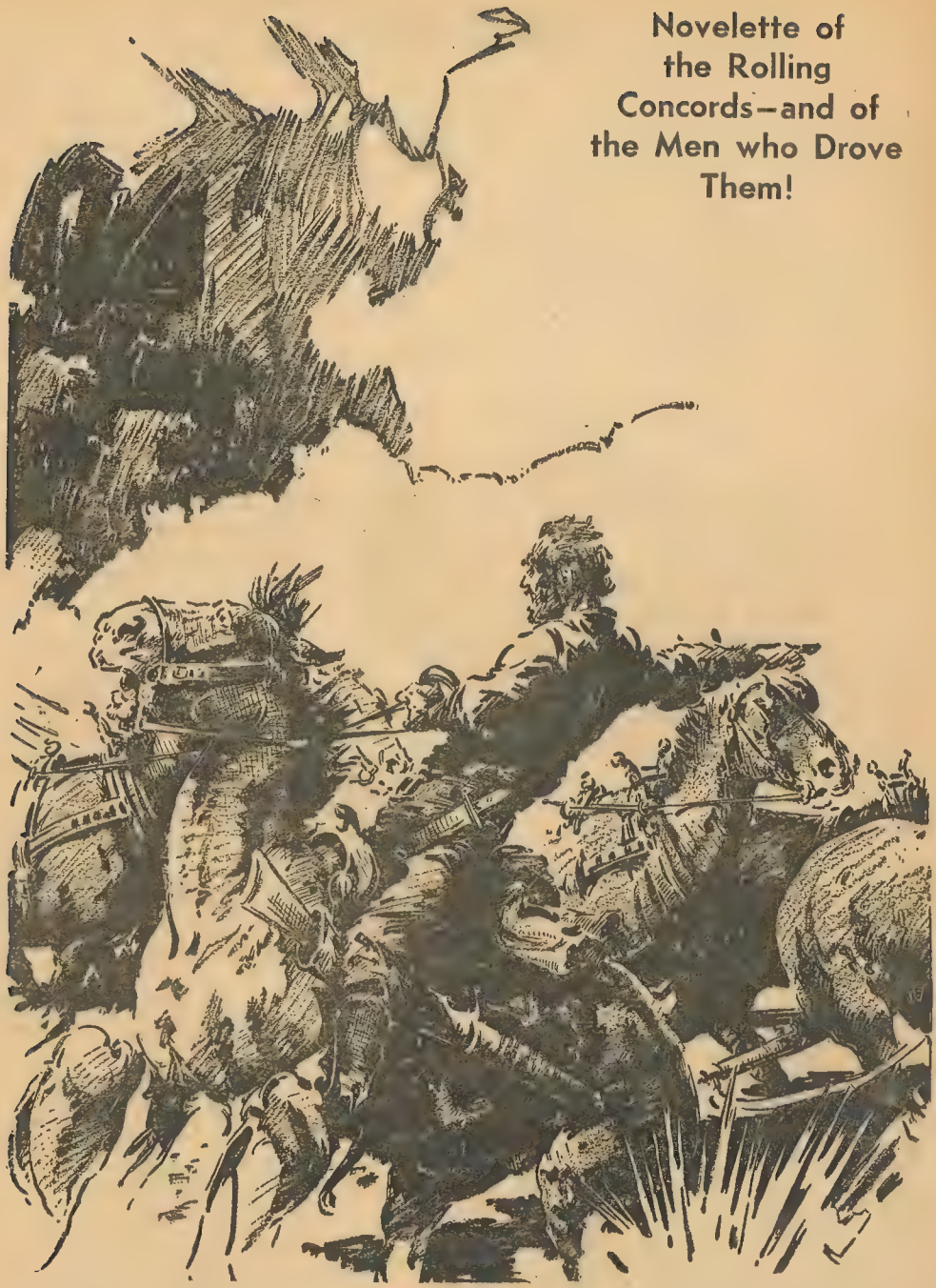
By ROBERT E. MAHAFFAY

CHAPTER ONE

Stage Trail Manhunter

THIS was Mail Route No. 8067, twenty-three days—or forty-three, depending on circumstances—from San Antonio, Texas, to San Diego, California. It was the first all-coach trans-

Novelette of the Rolling Concords—and of the Men who Drove Them!



It was one of the guards who curbed his sweating horse and gave the sharp, hoarse warning. . . .

continental run, and it was bad medicine.

Martin Gage had been hungry for forty-eight hours, and was getting hungrier with each lumbering mile. Yet he doubted if he could force food down his sandpaper throat, even if he had it. With his feet cocked up on mail sacks jammed on the floor of the stagecoach, he stared ahead.

Four days out of San Antonio they had run into this strip of country, already lean with famine, which marauding Comanches had looted and burned.

How far to the westward the ravaged area extended no one knew, but this much was certain: If it was very much farther this stageload of travelers was going to be a thin-bellied lot.

The stout, white-mustached gentleman on Gage's left blew his nose with a resounding explosion. "Damn the dust," he said, "and damn Mr. Abbot or Mr. Downing, whichever one built this confounded contraption. . . . I beg your pardon, by dear."

His daughter, who occupied the other end of the seat murmured, "It's very hot, isn't it?"

The coach hit a rock, pitched violently on its steer-hide thoroughbraces, and then slewed to a jolting halt.

Martin Gage unlatched the door on his side and sprang down, glad of any chance at all to stretch his legs.

They were in the middle of a greasewood-studded prairie which stretched with identical monotony in all directions. It was relieved only by the charred and blackened ruins of a relay station which lay deserted a quarter mile ahead.

The driver and the conductor shared the seat on top and now they exchanged curses.

The conductor was an axe-featured man whose left arm was gone at the elbow. He wore no coat; his tattered suspenders were crossed over a sweat-stained gray undershirt.

"Another one of 'em gone," he growled. "No grub, no water! We'll be eatin' harness 'fore we're through here!"

The driver continued to swear softly over the plight of his six mules which had had no relief since leaving Live Oak Creek.

"You reckon there's Injuns bunched up there waitin' for us?" the conductor wanted to know.

After unhurried reflection the driver decided there wasn't enough left of the station to hide enough Indians to bother about. "Maybe they left some feed," he suggested.

Martin Gage walked on beside the stage rather than climb back in. The Comanches had done a thorough job at the station. The stock, of course, was gone, and every scrap of food had been stolen or destroyed, the grain sacks ripped up.

It wasn't food so much as water that interested Gage. Behind them Escondido Springs had been fouled. And here, he discovered, the well was caved in. Gage frowned. They were in for a mighty dry stretch.

By the time he got back to the stage, the other passengers had clambered stiffly out of it and were standing disconsolately in the fast-darkening twilight.

The driver was a short, brawny man. "What'd you find?" he asked.

"Have to be dug out," Gage said. "How deep was it?"

"Forty-eight feet." The driver swore.

A scrawny little passenger who had said his name was Epperly piped up indignantly. "Look here, we can't go on eating nothing and drinking nothing indefinitely. According to the advertisements this line undertakes to serve its passengers meals and—"

"Brother," said the conductor mildly, "we serve the best there is to be had. This time it happens to be dried corn." He scooped up a hatful from one of the split sacks. "Or barley if you fancy a mouthful of that for variety."

The four other passengers accepted that information with varying displeasure.

A lean, well set up man with seamed cheeks—a California Stage Company official—nodded cheerfully. "I've eaten worse," he declared, "if the mules don't object."

The portly gentleman with the white mustache, Christopher Daly, publisher, looked worriedly at his daughter. "My dear," he said, "if I had dreamed—"

She laughed, and in the vast loneliness of the dark prairie the sound was reassuring. "It doesn't matter. We can boil the corn in a little water to soften it."

The conductor coughed. "Ma'am," he said reluctantly, "I'm thinking that the water we can spare will do better in our throats than boilin' away in a pan."

"Of course," she said. "I forgot."

The last of the passengers listened with a scornful twist to his flat-lipped mouth. He was tall and soundly put together, sleek in the dove-colored coat that he managed to keep unwrinkled, but his hands were too well preserved to be anything but a gambler's. His name, he had volunteered, was Hudseth.

"If this line offered you bones," he declared cooly, "you'd scramble for them like a pack of dogs." He turned his back on the others and began to hum a tune to himself.

From the keg lashed in the after boot the water was doled out in a tin cup. The cup was filled only halfway to the brim.

IT was full dark by the time the makeshift meal was over. A fire was vetoed as Indians might still be in the vicinity. The conductor strove earnestly but futilely to settle his passengers comfortably.

Martin Gage kept to himself, as he had since leaving San Antonio. He was a young man, hard-muscled and powerful. Not unhandsome, his face had a bony strength. His eyes would have been good had it not been for the hard bitterness which lay just beneath the surface.

He was sitting on the ground a little away from the ruined station. Beyond it he could hear the driver working doggedly over his hobbled mules; no one knew how much longer they would have to last.

His throat was burning again; those few ounces of water had only aggravated his thirst. A bit of moon drifted over the skyline, and the black shape of the stagecoach loomed a score of yards away.

It was an awkward and unprepossessing vehicle, of the type known as "Celerity Wagon"—little more than a mud wagon with a duck superstructure.

Still, Martin Gage's fingers itched for the feel of the lines. The desire was so strong it was like a fist gripping his entrails.

He remembered how his father had taught him to drive, by placing six sticks in the ground and attaching a rein to each of them. As a boy he had laced the six lines between his fingers, three to a hand, and learned to control them individually.

He had learned to pull any designated stick out of the ground without disturbing the others. When a man could do that he was on his way to handling six horses.

Martin Gage rolled on his back, staring up at the star-encrusted velvet of the sky. The savage bitterness in him amounted to physical pain. For he could never drive again.

The name of Martin Gage was blacklisted wherever there was organized staging.

The camp was quiet now. And out of the quiet came a sound—the muffled trickle of water—that made Gage cock his head. An instant later he was on his feet, going like a cat toward the stage.

A shadow stirred at the after end. A man's breath was drawn in with a sharp hiss. Martin Gage took the quick blow of a fist against his face, then grappled with the other man.

Pale moonlight had given him a brief glimpse of the gambler in the dove-colored coat.

Gage held his grip because he figured the man at least carried a sleeve gun, and they went down together. Struggling, they rolled on the ground before the gambler wrench an arm free with harsh fury.

He slugged twice at Gage's face before Gage could capture the arm again and twist it up and back. The gambler let go a grunting groan and then an oath of agony.

He was lying on his face when the conductor and the others came running up. Gage let go his hold and stood up, wiping at the blood which ran down from his nose.

The conductor said angrily, "What's this? Who—"

The gambler was on his feet by now, settling the shoulders of his coat. "I caught him stealing water," he said coolly.

The conductor's head swiveled angrily around.

"Look at his hand," Gage said.

With a quick movement the gambler pulled his right hand from the folds of his coat, jerked off the tin cup. There had been no time to disengage it, and when he had struck his first blow the handle had jammed against the rim, trapping two fingers.

"You thieving dog," said the one-armed conductor, and started toward him belligerently.

The gambler backed away two steps, and shook a derringer out of his sleeve. Moonlight struck against the stubby barrels.

"Forget it," he said. "I didn't get any. Next time bring enough water for your

passengers to drink." He looked at Gage. "This isn't finished."

"Whenever you're ready," Gage said evenly.

Hudseth kept backing away, and no one moved to stop him.

Christopher Daly *harumphed* from the depths of his paunch, and put a hand heartily on Martin Gage's shoulder.

"Son, we owe you a good deal for that. I don't believe you've even told us your name."

"No," said Gage, "I haven't." His lips were a thin, straight line.

They were all looking at him, the girl and little Epperly and the California Stage Company man.

"You've done us all a favor," Daly persisted. "We've a right to know who to thank."

There was a long quiet. Gage could feel the warm impact of the girl's scrutiny. He felt alone, all at once, alone and trapped. And a fierce pride made anger churn up in him.

"The name is Gage," he said. "Martin Gage."

He was watching the seamed face of the California man, because he would know. The tightening of the stageman's mouth told that he did. As clearly as if he could read the thought, Gage knew what he was thinking.

So this was Gage! This was the driver who had got drunk and wrecked his stage on a clean strip of road, killing three passengers. This was the man whom no sensible stage line would touch. Not at any price.

Christopher Daly went on talking. He was a fool, Gage thought. An honest man, but still a fool.

"I happen to have a little influence," he declared, "where it counts. What line do you follow, young man? What do you plan to do in the West? There's opportunity for everyone out here."

Martin Gage stood with the moonlight against the hard, tight lines of his face. The harsh disappointment and loneliness of his memories came up with a rush, and he spoke bleakly.

"I'm here to find a man. Find him and kill him."

He wheeled around and stalked to his blanket.

CHAPTER TWO

River Grief

BY daylight the stage was rolling again. Heat came with the first rays of the sun, and when the flaps were rolled up, dust from the mules' hoofs boiled into the choking interior.

Martin Gage couldn't forget the look of startled disgust which had come into the girl's eyes. He saw now that she was extraordinarily pretty, and that she had only contempt for him.

One arm hooked in the arm-sling, Gage stared straight ahead.

He was, he reflected, more of an outcast than Hudseth, the gambler, who sat across from him, lips perpetually curled, in indifferent isolation. Hudseth cared for no one or nothing.

Neither, Martin Gage told himself, did he. The hopes and the plans he had made were smashed. In place of his love for staging there was only hatred.

He had one thing left to do. Just one.

The soft mutter of the hubs had changed to a dry rasp, for there had been no grease at the ruined stations. Jolting and rocking like a pea in a teacup, the stage bore westward.

Between San Antonio and San Diego lay nearly fifteen hundred miles of desert and mountains and wasteland. Even the shining spots of danger could not destroy the terrifying monotony. The jingling of chains, the slap of lathered harness, the steady grind of dust-smoked wheels all screamed in a man's head.

They toiled on and up into the Texas Rockies. They had two more days of short rations, but there was water at Van Horn. Then came the Rio Grande, and the trek northwestward along its bank to El Paso.

El Paso was a blistering little huddle of adobe shacks. There, due to a shortage of relay animals, the stage lay over for three days. On the first day Martin Gage dropped in at the stage office.

The clerk was an American with buck teeth and a slantwise way of looking at a man.

"No tellin' for sure when a coach'll pull out," he advised without being asked.

"I don't care when it pulls out," Gage said. "I'm looking for a man named Matt Griswell."

"Griswell? He's 'way west of here."

"Where?"

"Ain't just certain. He was agent at Tucson for a while. Then they jumped him to superintendent on the Yuma division. You want him in particular or is there somethin' I can do?"

"I want him in particular."

It was a new driver and a new stage that pulled out of El Paso, although the axe-faced conductor in the gray undershirt was going on through.

More mail had come down from Santa Fe—most of it worthless government documents which went toll free—and the coach was so jammed with it that there was scarcely room for the passengers. The delay in the squalid and cheerless little town had roughened rather than rested tempers.

At Fort Fillmore Martin Gage got down, and from force of habit inspected the team. It was strapped up a little more tightly than he would have liked. Taut pole-straps and traces meant that the spans couldn't be individually reined, and on a rough road the entire team took a beating from the pole.

Gage shrugged, angry with himself for the direction of his thoughts. He was through with staging. The sooner he ripped it out of his mind, the better.

With the stage lurching on northward, Christopher Daly picked up an argument that was never-ending.

"Mark me," he declared wrathfully, "there'll be a war between the states over this mail route yet. Between Buchanan in the White House and that rascal of a postmaster-general, this country has been sold a bill of goods!"

The California stageman—his name was Holloway—nodded brusquely. "The Central route is a thousand miles shorter. Snow in the Sierras' Buchanan claims! Nonsense, I say. A road can be opened and kept open."

"Not so long as the postmaster-general hails from Memphis," roared Daly. "What that crowd is after is an All-Southern Pacific Railroad. In the South, by the South and for the South!"

The stage jerked restlessly; a volley of

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curses came from the driver. Water splashed under the team's hoofs.

The Rio Grande was rolling, a river of yellow mud, with whispering insistence against the wheels. It was swollen above its normal level, but the ford was still passable.

In less than a minute, Gage sensed that the driver was in trouble. The Comanche raids had made serious inroads on the stock, and one of the swing span was green. Tightly laced in, the mule was nervous in the rushing water which had reached his knees.

The driver's cursing took on an urgent note.

Little Epperly's face turned haggard with alarm. Water was boiling against the coach's running gear, and a spurt of it came in under the door.

The girl said, "Oh!" and the back of her hand went up against her mouth as the stage tilted with a jolt to the left. Christopher Daly lifted his blue cotton umbrella and pounded at the roof.

Martin Gage snatched at the door catch, but he was too late.

The green swing mule had thrown the team into a panic, and the leaders were doubling back. Had his wheelers been more loosely harnessed, the driver might have used them to head off the leaders, but the maneuver failed.

The stage pitched far over to the left; water poured with a gurgling rush into it.

"The other door!" roared Gage. "One at a time!"

A choked scream came from Epperly. The California stageman cooly threw open the door, said something to the girl. Across from Gage, the gambler, his teeth bared, lunged up and toward it. Gage caught him by the collar and flung him back.

FOR precious seconds the flooded coach was a thrashing melee of arms and legs. Gage was the last one out. The yellow current was sweeping the coach downriver; the mules had swung around in a tangle which the driver, the lines still in his gloved hands, was fighting to unravel.

Four men were clinging to the top of the stage. Gage saw the white-mustached face of Christopher Daly, pale with horror.

The old man cried, "Gold help me! My daughter—"

Gage went under water, grimly aware of the danger he ran of being trapped beneath the coach. He found nothing, came up and went down again.

This time his hand tangled in heavy cloth. He clung to it, caught an arm, and came up with his lungs bursting.

He was below the coach now, still in peril from the frantically scrambling team, with the current tugging viciously at him. He started for the far bank, boots and clothing and the limp body of the girl pulling him down. Behind him lifted a croaking shout.

All but done in, he got footing, and then dropped to his knees, the breath stabbing like hot irons in his water-tortured lungs. After a moment he began to work on the girl. Helpless in the water, she had been more terrified than anything else.

Veil and hat were gone. Her hair had tumbled in wet curls about her forehead, and her cheeks were flushed and warm.

Gage was rubbing her wrists. He stopped as suddenly as if paralysis had gripped him. He was in love with this girl. He knew it as surely as he understood the hopelessness of it. She despised him as a man to whom killing was a cold premeditated business. He was that and nothing more.

Sullen resentment stormed up in him. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered—this girl, or staging, or any of the fine, brave hopes he had once held.

His face was dark and hard when her eyes opened. Memory of her terror filled them, then they softened. Softened, that is, until they fastened on Martin Gage.

He stood up abruptly, not looking at her. "You're safe," he said. "They'll be here in a minute or so."

The driver had got the stage around, and it was climbing the steep west bank. Christopher Daly and the conductor came running along the bank.

The girl had got to her feet unaided, and the old man choked, "Joan! Joan! If you had—"

The girl said, "It didn't happen, father. So it doesn't matter." There was a queer tone to her voice. Gage knew she was

looking at him, but he refused to lift his glance.

Daly turned to him. "Sir," he said, "I don't care what you are or what you've done. If it is ever within my power to—"

Still torn because of what he wanted and could not have, Martin Gage said roughly, "She said it all. It doesn't matter." He strode back toward the water-soaked coach.

A new and better rig waited at La Mesilla. Fresh powder was doled out for the pistols. An armed guard of four riders was picked up for the run across the treacherous Apache country to Tucson.

Behind them lay the Organ Mountains, slim and intricate spires standing against the sky. Ahead stretched a tortuous pathway across the seven deserts to the Coast.

Holloway, his seamed face blank, chewed stubbornly at a pipe which he refused to light because of Joan Daly. The look of bottled fear was steady in the eyes of Epperly now; it ran as relentlessly as the blood in his veins.

Hudseth, the gambler, crouched in his corner like a chained lion. Sneering disdain was still chiseled on his flat lips, but a fuming restlessness lay behind it. He had dug a pack of cards out of his pocket, and hour after hour he riffled them through his fingers. That man, Martin Gage thought, was going to explode.

Daly's plump face had paled, so that the tiny purple veins made a visible network across his cheeks and nose.

Only Joan Daly, or so it seemed to Gage, remained unchanged. Her fibre was more than a match for the hardship, for the infernal monotony.

The days began as before. Long intervals of racking discomfort, punctuated by irregular meals—beans or jerked beef and hard bread washed down with inklike coffee. Sleeping was done by day or by night, in the stage or under it, in a hut of sticks or the shelter of a thatched roof over low adobe walls.

The land was changing. Between mesquite and sage sprang the feathery catclaw, cactus and an occasional white bloom of yucca. Mountains of sun-blasted rock lay low against the horizon.

With that never-ending patter of hoofs and rolling rattle of wheels the stage

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forged beyond Cook's Springs, beyond Rio Mimbres, beyond Peloncillo, ever toward the setting sun.

It was close to dusk when camp was made at the station in the shadow of Stein's Peak. No fire was permitted. When a supper of bread and cold beef had been washed down with water, the driver and stock-tender began harnessing a fresh team. The four guards went on along the trail at a walk and soon disappeared beyond a bend in the road.

Holloway climbed stiffly to his feet. "Another hitch tonight?"

The conductor snapped his tattered suspenders. "Best time to sneak through Apache Pass is after dark. If there is any best time for that stretch of hell!"

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HUDSETH, as usual, had taken his plate apart from the others, but he heard those words and came back slowly toward the coach. His lean face was pinched in a queer way and his eyes, red from sleeplessness, were blazing.

"We've had plenty for today," he said. "Plenty."

The conductor shrugged. "Can't help it. My job's keepin' your hair where it is, if I can."

"This rig won't budge an inch further tonight!" The gambler still looked sleek in his dove-colored coat, but there was a quality in his voice that made the driver lift his head.

"Get away from those mules!" Hudseth told him in a high-pitched whine.

Martin Gage had seen this happen before and called sharply, "Watch out!"

The driver was either new to it or else he was stupid, for he said bluntly, "Mind your own damned business!" and reached for a trace.

He never got his hand on it. In one whiplike motion Hudseth had snatched a revolver from under his coat, leveled it and fired.

The driver pitched down, a bullet through his head.

Martin Gage was running in, but he hadn't been close enough. The gambler whirled toward him, and again the revolver in his hand spat flame.

Gage hauled up short. "Steady," he said. "Put it down, man, put it down."

But the madness had set its teeth too deeply in Hudseth to be shaken loose by words. Some faint memory of their earlier encounter drove the gambler toward Gage, still shooting.

A slug clipped Gage's shoulder, and he dropped to one knee. He shouted again, and then pulled his own gun.

He wasn't a gun-fighter and he didn't have time to look for inch-wide targets. When his first bullet didn't stop Hudseth he triggered twice more. Hudseth went down sprawling, the madness suddenly wiped out of his eyes.

Martin Gage stood where he was looking down at the smoking cap-and-ball, feeling sick and feeling angry.

"Tough luck, kid," said Holloway gently. "No fault of yours." He went over and knelt by Hudseth and then straightened. "It'll hit some men that way. Nothing to be done about it."

The conductor swore at the gaping stock-tender. "Can't leave 'em lyin' there. Get along with it."

"How long," Holloway asked, "before you can scare up another driver?"

The conductor scowled at the pinned-up sleeve of his left arm. "There ain't many I'd want goin' through Apache. Say a week. Most likely two."

Holloway shrugged. "I can't stand a two-week layover." He nodded toward Daly. "Neither can that gentleman. Nor his daughter."

"You can't pick up drivers the way you can buffalo chips for a fire," retorted the conductor irritably.

"You've got a driver," Holloway said. "Use him." And he nodded directly at Martin Gage.

Frowning, the conductor pivoted his head. "You handle six?"

Blood was throbbing up into Martin Gage's throat, and his heart began to thunder. He hated himself in that moment because a thing he had tried to deny held so powerful a hold on him.

He could see the bloodless face of old Christopher Daly turned toward him. Daly was a sick man. He needed medical help— help he couldn't get here.

"I've handled six," Gage said.

"You don't know the road."

"The team does. That's enough."

Pulled back by the sound of the shots, the armed guard came out of the dimming west at a gallop.

The conductor squinted at them, at the team and at Gage. "Try it," he said.

CHAPTER THREE

Through Apache Pass

IN the gathering twilight the stage rattled west, the guard cantering in the lead. The feel of the lines between his fingers should have done something to Martin Gage, but it didn't. Because Joan Daly was riding on the seat beside him.

She had wheedled the seat from the conductor. She would faint, she said, in the blast-furnace interior of the coach. Ten minutes, even five, and she would be all right.

The conductor, scowling at the horizon and sky, had given her until dark.

Gage didn't look at her, and his bony jaw was set. In the minutes of dimness remaining he was feeling out the team which he had ordered harnessed to suit him. There was a difference between reinsmen and drivers, and Gage belonged among the former.

The skill of it was in his fingers. On a turn he could send the team streaming around in a beautiful and unbroken arc without moving his hands from his knees.

Fingering and delicate brake work did it. Span by span the team swept around, swings and wheelers pulling straight until their turn came for the maneuver.

Joan Daly watched it and then said softly, "I think you're not a killing man."

Martin Gage felt his neck go scarlet, but he said nothing.

"You're not," she said, "and you won't be—not so long as you love driving."

He said grimly, "This is the last piece of driving I will ever do."

"But you love it."

"Nothing ever means so much to a man," he said, "that he can't come to hate it."

In the warm dimness he sensed that her face was turned toward him, but he dared not look.

"I think you are a very proud man, and perhaps a foolish one—but you are not a killer. . . . I will go inside now, if you please."

The conductor had a brace of pistols in his belt; a Sharp's rifle rested in leather loops against the footboard. Each of the inside men was provided with a short gun, and Holloway had another rifle. Two of the guards had dropped behind the coach; the other two trotted ahead.

For an hour or more no word was spoken. Then Gage asked, "Where will I be mostly likely to run into Matt Griswell?"

The conductor shook his head. "Hard tellin'. He's on the go most of the time. Maybe in Tucson. Maybe farther along."

It was past midnight when the stage creaked into Apache station. The squaw wife of the stock-tender set out tortillas and muddy coffee while the team was being changed.

Over this place, so close to the narrow gateway which had witnessed so much slaughter, lay a grim tension.

The stock-tender spat as he handed up the lines. "They been almighty quiet for a fortnight now. Feller said they was down in Sonora, but maybe they ain't."

Then with a lurch and a groan the stage was off. Up ahead loomed the black barrier through which the Pass wound. Hubs muttered greasily, iron tires scraped with a noisy clatter over rock. The team was moving easily, and Gage let the reins hang slack.

A team accustomed to continually rely-

ing on the bit for instructions couldn't be depended on to think for itself in emergencies. Habit was worth more right now than an uneasy tinkering with the lines.

The conductor nodded approvingly. "Son, this ain't the first stagin' you've done."

They were in among the precipitous mountains now, climbing, hoof beats ringing hollowly. Halfway through. Maybe a little more.

A rider came at a clattering gallop out of the west. It was one of the guards, spurring hard. He swung alongside, snapped, "Hay in the road. Whole stack. Aim to fire it, I reckon."

The conductor had a pistol out of his belt and across his lap. "Swing 'em, son," he bit out. "Swing 'em quick!"

Gage's fingers moved instantly and automatically, drawing up the lines, the lead line on the off side more than the others.

He started to brake—the sound and the bit pressure would have started the turn—but didn't. Behind them a tongue of flame had leaped up in the blackness.

The conductor saw it too and roared, "Too late, boy! Run for it!"

It was an old trick. Feeders of hay led away from the main stack. Indians behind them had fired a heap when the stage went past. To risk the delay of a turn now would be more dangerous than plunging ahead.

Gage shouted at his team, and they lunged into a dead run.

Up ahead a crackle of shooting broke out. That would be the other guard, trying to keep a hole open for the stage.

Points of flame sprang up to the right and left. The stage was tunneling into the night, careening like a thing gone mad. A moment more and there would be a glare to highlight it.

From the wall of blackness at either hand burst a flight of arrows and bullets from muzzle-loading trade guns. Gage let the twelve-foot buckskin lash of his whip run out. The conductor had an arrow through the muscle of his good arm below the elbow, but he managed to lift his revolver, nevertheless, and emptied it at the spot where gun flame spurted.

Twenty yards ahead a trickle of fire licked at the edge of the main stack. A half naked Apache, doubled close to the ground, went racing away from it.

Inside the coach Holloway's Sharp's roared, and the running Indian flipped over over like a shot rabbit.

Gage saw it out of the corner of his eye. He had his hands full. The coach was slewing under him, threatening at any moment to capsize. The team shied away from the leaping blaze, trying to edge off the road. Gage ruled them with an iron hand, his voice booming a mixture of command and encouragement.

They fought raggedly, steadied, then lifted their pace.

The young mountain of hay exploded as their reaching hoofs hit it. Fire was on the far side, but hadn't yet wholly enveloped the pile.

There was the reek of singed hair, a smother of straw that blinded Gage and blocked his nostrils. Wisps of the burning stuff brushed at his clothing. The stage rocked over on two wheels, lurched back with a roll that all but upended it.

Martin Gage's hands were as steady as stone, and the stage pulled through.

THERE had been a moment in which it was a clean target, except for the billowing smoke. Still, it had been a moment only. A few arrows stood quivering in the wooden superstructure; bullets had gouged the polished frame. But the stage was still rolling, rocketing deeper into the Pass, shielded by darkness.

The conductor rasped, "Damnedest, neatest piece of drivin' I ever—"

Hoofbeats drummed in the rear, but the poorly-kept Indian ponies were no match for grain-fed stage mules.

The conductor leaned down and roared, "Below there! How do you stand?"

He got an answer, but Martin Gage didn't hear what it was. Something was wrong with the near wheeler. He was lagging and there was a threatened break in the rhythm of his run. A touch with the butt of the whip brought a staggering spurt, but it was still wrong.

Gage flung a warning to the conductor, kicked on the brake.

Before it could take effect, the mule fell and the team was piled up.

(Continued on page 102)

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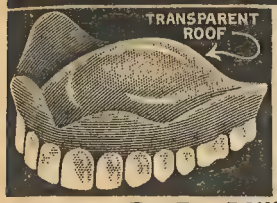

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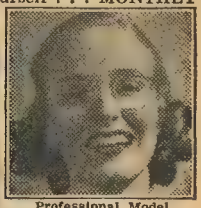
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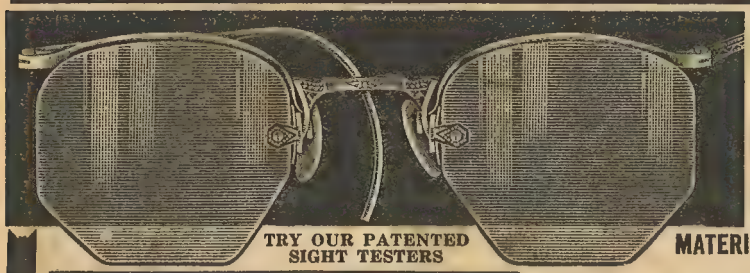
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(Continued from page 100)

Gage was braced, but the conductor wasn't. He went spilling down off the seat. Gage hooked his lines and jumped. He landed on his feet, flung open the coach door. In the darkness he could see nothing of the tumbled confusion there.

"Get the mail sacks out," he said. "Throw 'em between the wheels and get behind 'em."

He started back for the team. Two riders came with a rush along the trail. By the sound the horses were shod, so they were not Apaches.

Two of the guards left. Two out of four. One of them leaned down and shouted something, but the thrashing of the remaining mules made such a racket that Gage couldn't hear.

An arrow came out of the blackness, slashing the sleeve of Gage's coat. He moved toward the leaders to get them on their feet and quiet them. Guns began to talk close at hand. That meant the guards and perhaps some of the passengers had set up some kind of organized protection. Holloway could be counted on; perhaps Daly; Epperly was questionable.

The conductor loomed at Gage's elbow and touched him. "How bad?"

"One down. Hold this fellow. I'm going to cut the wheeler out."

The conductor swore. "Give those devils ten minutes an' they'll have us bottled up here like gophers in a hole."

Martin Gage stood stock still, remembering another time when he had looked at the dead faces of three passengers entrusted to him.

"Then they can have the team," he said.

"You crazy?" the conductor yelled at him furiously.

"It's what they're after. It'll hold 'em long enough to get us out of this trap. . . . Move, man!"

The sure and savage way he spoke made the conductor spin away, jumping fast. Between them they cut the team loose. With the help of a guard they sent the five mules and the two guards' horses at a clattering gallop back into the Pass.

There would be wrangling for possession, perhaps a chase. There might even be booty enough to make further attack unprofitable.

Gage picked up the Sharp's, dropped on one knee beside the wagon with its barricade of mail sacks and blankets. He could make out the white blur that was Holloway's face.

The stageman said, "Long gamble, son."

"The best we had. Anybody hurt?"

"Daly. Slug broke his hip, I think. He's still inside. The girl's with him."

That was bad. They had to be got out of there in a hurry.

For the next minute or two, though, there was no chance. Ponies came scurrying along in the Pass, their riders screeching fiendishly. Muzzle-loaders were exploding; arrows whisked into the body of the stalled coach.

It sounded like the end of the world, but the charge wasn't as whole-hearted as it might have been if the stock hadn't already been won. Rifles poured a hot fire down the Pass, and at closer range pistols set up a more concentrated fusillade.

The charge slackened, broke, turned hastily back. Six well-armed men would be an expensive nut to crack.

"More fighting men than I figured on," said Holloway dryly. He meant Epperly. The little man had calmly emptied his revolver, and was carefully stuffing in new charges.

"They don't like what they've had, and aren't anxious for more," the conductor offered.

Gage nodded. "We'll run for it while we can."

"What about the old man?"

"Uncouple the front running gear. Carry him on the truck. A pair of you cover us while we do it."

They worked fast, feeling their way in the darkness, and only a few random shots came from the ambushers.

Christopher Daly was lifted out of the coach and placed on a pad of blankets on the truck. Joan Daly refused to ride. Whatever her weight was worth, it would be used along with the rest.

Four men, Gage among them, took up the pole. The others, Joan Daly, the wounded conductor and Epperly, leaned against the truck, pushing when they could.

The wheels began to roll. It was a crawling pace and back-wrenching work,

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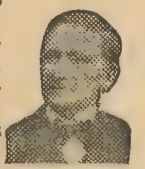

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but it meant that Daly could be moved without suffering permanent damage. In the darkness each rattle of the wheels was magnified by the enclosing cliffs into the chatter of pursuing hoofs.

The sweat came out on Martin Gage's face. He pulled until every muscle of his back and legs cried out in torture. The torture turned to numbness, and still the little party forged yard by yard into the west.

With dawn the black ramparts of the hills were behind them. Out of them still could come painted, screaming death. The sun came up again with its blistering torment, savage and merciless.

More mountains huddled, dark and sun-blasted, against the horizon, and in between lay the wastes of sand and rock and cat-claw and cactus. Yucca, slim and white, looked maddeningly cool.

Christopher Daly lay on the padded truck, unconscious and groaning. The arrow had been drawn from the conductor's arm, and the wound bound, but the arm had swollen alarmingly. Only twice had Martin Gage looked around at the girl's face. Her drawn, stricken look was more than he could stand. But she didn't complain.

It was nearly noon when they saw the streak of dust far to the westward. It was all of an hour before the streak became a speck, and the speck, at length, a coach and six.

The conductor lifted his head and croaked, "That's the eastbound. They won't tackle the Pass now, I reckon. They'll haul us back to Tucson."

CHAPTER FOUR

Dusty Payoff

FOR a week the party was stranded in Tucson, a miserable collection of adobe huts, sun-burned and forlorn. Martin Gage endured the wait for an adequate conveyance with mounting restlessness.

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way, his seamed face as impervious as ever, was ready. With no crisis to lift him out of himself, little Epperly was indignant, dissatisfied, full of complaints.

Only Christopher Daly and his daughter were to be left behind. An army surgeon had repaired the broken hip, but it would be a month at least before he could move.

The week had been a bad one for Martin Gage. There were no more than a score of Americans among the town's two thousand Mexicans, and he hadn't been able to avoid seeing Joan Daly. He was certain now that his love for her was so deep he could never get the roots of it out of his life.

He wanted desperately to tell her that, but he hadn't. He wanted to blurt out to her the story of that black event on the stage roads of Missouri—the event in which Matt Griswell had shared.

There were still five hundred miles of desert and grief to be covered, but somewhere along that stretch Griswell was to be found. A year of aching torture would then be paid for.

He timed his visit to Joan Daly and her father so that he would have only a few minutes before the stage pulled out.

Christopher Daly lay on a cot, painfully strapped up in splints. The cabin had a dirt floor and only an item or two of makeshift furniture. The old man smiled.

"We'll see you again, son. I couldn't feel closer to a boy of my own. None of us would have pulled through, I guess, if it hadn't been for you."

He tried to be hearty about it, and couldn't quite make it. Martin Gage had to keep his jaw set tight, because the old man felt that he was being deserted. It was in his voice, but he was too proud to say it.

Gage said, "Good-bye, sir. It won't be long."

It was going to be long, though. It was going to be never. Gage knew it, and he could see that the girl, when he turned to face her, knew it too.

She had told him once that he wasn't a killer. She wasn't going to tell him again. She might have, Gage thought, if she hadn't loved him.

She could ask him as a friend, or even

a stranger, not to abandon her father to his bitter misery. She couldn't ask that help of the man she loved. Not when his dark hatred of another man was greater than his love for her.

Gage said huskily, "Luck to you both. It won't be so bad, from here on."

Joan Daly's voice was soft. "It's a mistake to hitch one's life to the bad things that happen in it."

"Sometimes," he said, "the bad has to be cut out before life is worth living."

She stared at him, unwilling even to say good-by. He brought the words with a wrench out of his throat presently, turned and strode out.

The mules were harnessed, the passenger wagon ready to go. Holloway sat in his corner, puffing at his pipe. His eyes studied Gage shrewdly and silently.

The gruelling days began again. More desert with its burning sand, its greasewood and prickly pear and an occasional giant saguaro cactus. The great barren mesas, making a spiky backbone against the sky. Monotony and torturing heat. Sleeplessness and the everlasting racket of team and iron-rimmed wheels.

They crawled northwestward to the Gila River and Maricopa where the bodies of half a hundred Yuma Indians lay rotting in the sun, their conquerors, the Pimas and Maricopas, being superstitious about touching slain enemies.

On across the Forty-Mile Desert in the great bend of the Gila, past Murderer's Grave and Oatman Flat. Passengers who had long since talked themselves out, rode in sullen silence, hating their fellow travelers, hating the coach and the world of sun-shrivelled monotony about them.

Then Fort Yuma on its high bluff by the broad and silently-running Colorado. And Martin Gage again asked his grim question.

The agent shook his head. Matt Griswell was somewhere in California. San Diego, maybe. Maybe somewhere in between.

So when the stage rolled, Martin Gage rolled with it. This piece of California—land of gold and promise—was worse than anything yet encountered. It was a skillet-hot waste of sand and boulders. Sand that dripped from the wheel spokes, tugged at

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the ankles of the plodding, sweating mules.

Sand was the keynote of a frightening desolation. It lay banked in arroyos, piled against withered shrubs, whipped into writhing banks by the wind. Blunted hills held this area cupped, and into the hollow the sun spilled its eternal torment.

Holloway sucked stolidly at his pipe, and he looked at Martin Gage. "You could have gone back," he said, "from Yuma. Girls like that don't happen twice."

Mile by mile the tension had been building up in Gage. He said now, hoarsely, "A man can't always have what he wants."

"Maybe not. Maybe, too, killing another man isn't what it's cracked up to be."

"It will be to me," said Gage.

Holloway shrugged. "There's men that are worth killing, and men that aren't. If I was giving up everything I wanted, I'd need to be plumb sure it was worth it."

MARTIN GAGE stared straight ahead. And at last he said in a low voice, "Three people died in that wreck. One of them was a woman. Griswell stole the money he should have spent keeping the coaches up. He jiggled the accounts so they showed everything was in tip-top order. Only they weren't; half those rigs were death traps. The front axle broke in two like it was made of cheese."

Gage's eyes went down to his hands. "Maybe you've tried to stop a man's bleeding to death—and not been able to—with him looking at you like it was your fault."

"You knew it wasn't."

"Nobody else did. My word didn't amount to anything. Matt Griswell was superintendent and I was a kid driver. He claimed I was drunk, hired witnesses to prove it. Had me blacklisted. The worse he could make me look, the cleaner his skirts would be." Martin Gage pulled in a deep breath. "For close to a year now I been trying to catch up with him."

They camped that night at Indian Wells, and at dawn were moving again.

It was nearly noon when the hot air grew even hotter. The sun had turned to a dull muddy red, and presently a black cloud came spearing up out of the desert.

The first blast of burning wind was warning of the havoc to come. The driver pulled in his team, and the conductor came plowing back to shout into the coach, "Windstorm comin'! Sand with it!"

Gage and Holloway sprang down to lend a hand with the team. The mules were unhitched and hastily hobbled.

Preparations were no more than complete when the sand struck. It came first like a peppering from random needles, then in a screaming wall that staggered the coach when it hit. The sand hissed in the veering wind, ripped at the stage.

Everything loose had been torn away from the stage. Wind and sand had pried into the after boot, blown it away. Shadows flitted restlessly in the gloom—mesquite whipped in the blast of sand.

It wasn't dark and it wasn't light. The sky was surging chaos colored red and black, and from somewhere came that eerie yellowness which touched everything.

Martin Gage took it with the rest inside the coach. The sides were full of gaps through which wind and sand whistled, and the stage itself leaned and rocked as if it were being pummeled by breaking seas.

Toward the middle of the afternoon the gale lost some of its virulence, though it was still far from over. And along with the wind's howling came a croaking shout.

Two riders had come stumbling out of the west and had stopped in the lee of the stage.

Forcing the door open, the conductor stepped down. He shouted something that was lost, then the riders were out of their saddles and the conductor was lending a hand with their hobbles. The horses drifted a little, rumps to the wind, heads down between their forelegs.

The three men climbed into the shelter of the coach. Both the newcomers were muffled above the nose, with hats deep-slanted across foreheads.

Martin Gage didn't know what made him reach out and jerk back the lapel of the shorter man's coat. He couldn't have known for sure that it would reveal the broad scar angling down across a prominent cheekbone.

They sat directly across from each other against the side of the coach. Matt

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Griswell was squat, heavy-set. Thick lips partially covered teeth which were like large white bones.

He had looked up angrily when Gage tugged open his coat; recognition made the look change to bleak animosity.

Martin Gage's gun was jammed inside his belt, awkward to get at. Nevertheless, he said, "It's been a long chase, Matt. Get that gun out of your pocket."

Griswell didn't need to hear the precise words, but he pretended he hadn't, and started at the other passengers, puzzled.

"Pull that gun!" said Gage.

As quietly as he could, and still be heard, Griswell said, "The man's gone crazy. Block him on that side, one of you!"

Little Epperly yelped with dismay.

The conductor croaked, "He's the *super,* man! He's Griswell!"

In the crowded and crammed interior there was scarcely room to move. If the conductor chose to pile on top of him, Gage knew he would be finished.

He reached out fast with his fist, caught the front of Griswell's coat. With his left he slapped the door catch, and slung Griswell through it. The superintendent sprawled on his hands and knees, and he had to struggle to get his balance.

Martin Gage was through after him.

"You're going to die, Matt. You'd have killed me your own crooked way once. Try it this time square."

Griswell got up slowly. "This man's out of his head, conductor!" he called sharply. "Knock him down from in there! He's a danger to all of us!"

That was an order.

"Quick, man," cried Gage, "or I'll cut you down without a draw!"

HE WAS backing away, so that a shot from inside the stage would be more difficult. A commotion had been stirred up there; a man's back blocked the door which hung half open.

Griswell was moving. He kept a line of talk which didn't penetrate to the stage, but which Gage could just hear.

"Why, sure, kid, if that's the way you want it. Only what's done is done. We can talk this out. I crossed you. I admit that. But I'll square it for you. Why, kid,

there's a gold mine here for both of us. I'll cut you in. I'll—"

He was circling through the sand.

Gage saw what he was up to just as Griswell stopped shuffling and took a long jump. It put him with his back to the wind while the flying particles of sand drove with their full stinging fury against Martin Gage's face and eyes.

As he jumped, Griswell tugged the revolver from his belt, flung it up and shot.

The slug ripped along Martin Gage's side, high up, scraping bone. Half blinded, Gage pulled up his revolver. Griswell was a blur in the whirling sand.

Gage marked that blur. Another slash of flame darted from it. Then Gage was shooting blindly.

After four shots he got a sleeve up and tore it across his eyes and then stumbled out of the direct blast of the wind.

Matt Griswell was down on his knees. His right wrist was shattered and bloody.

The gun had been knocked out of his broken hand. He was reaching for it with the other, but it was a few inches out of his grasp. He would have to shuffle for it on his knees.

He was caught. He was reaching for the weapon and he saw Gage, no longer blinded, ready for the shot that would finish him.

The tight, rough fury in his eyes weakened, and ghastly fright came into them. "Kid," he cried, "for God's sake, kid, don't—"

Martin Gage's gun was up, and sweeping through him was the bitter memory he had nourished for so long. He had only

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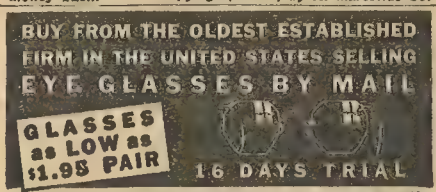

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to trip the hammer and it would be over. Over and paid for.

He steeled himself as he stood there, eyes raw and streaming, the whip of wind and sand against his back, and around him the bleak savagery of a desert aroused. This was it.

He stood there for a long time, and then he looked down at the gun in his fist. He stared at it as if he didn't believe it was beyond his power to make the gun do what he asked of it.

It was. He threw the gun away from him into the sand.

Matt Griswell moved his sound knee six inches, and reached for the revolver which lay beside him. Maybe he planned to use it and maybe he didn't.

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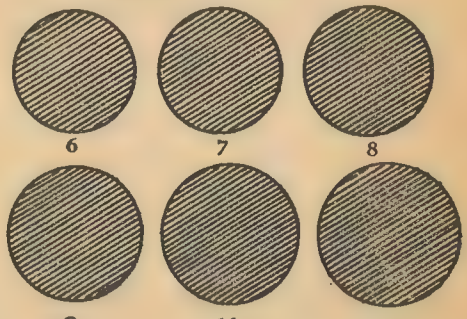

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He kicked away the revolver before Griswell could touch it. He had a gun of his own and it was out, suggesting a threat to the conductor as he emerged.

The wind had almost blown itself out. "I'm running this for a while," Holloway snapped crisply. "Leave that man alone!"

He meant Griswell, and the superintendent gasped, "Damn it, man, I'm bleeding to death!"

"Go ahead," said Holloway. "You'll talk or you'll lose every drop you've got."

"Talk?"

"I want the story of you and the boy here. I aim to get it."

Matt Griswell's lips had turned white before he decided that the California stageman meant what he said. He talked then with a rush, the words spilling out of his throat in a race with death. . . .

When it was over, the conductor's lips were twisted wryly, as if he had bitten into a piece of spoiled pie.

"I'll patch him up just enough to get the hell out of this country," he said grimly, "but no more."

Martin Gage hadn't listened particularly. He was thinking of himself as a weak-livered fool who had carried a gun for a year, only to turn coward when the chips were down.

Holloway went over to him and put a hand warmly on his shoulder. "Son, you're not the first man that found killing ain't all it's cracked up to be."

Martin Gage said nothing, and Holloway chuckled. "Forget it. The California Stage Company doesn't hire gunmen, but they'll go a long way to lay their hands on a man who can handle six of the best the way you did in Apache Pass. Interested?"

Martin Gage lifted his head. "You mean that?"

"Never meant anything more. I can put reins between your fingers before a week is out."

"You'll have to wait," Martin Gage said, grinning. "I'm going back to Tucson first."

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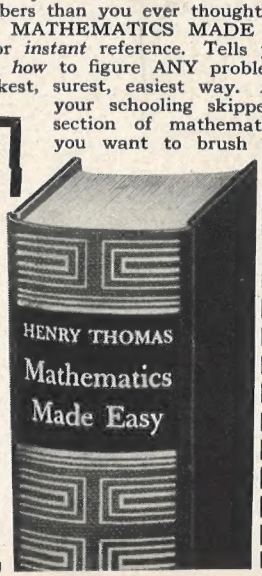

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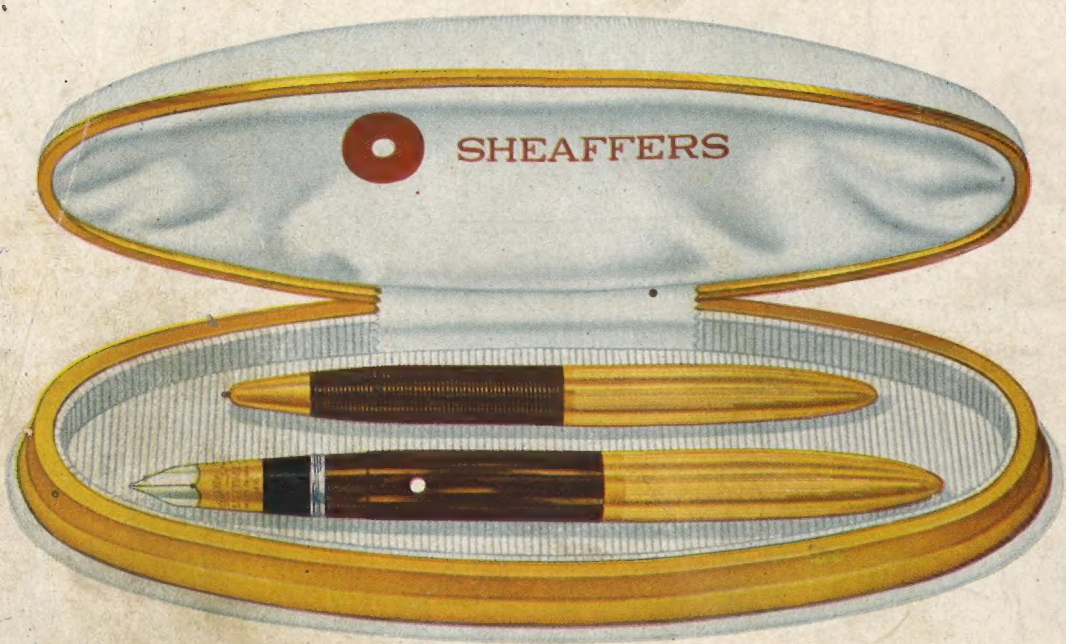

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